

## **LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND REGISTERED DISABILITIES POLICY**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Optimi College (Pty) Ltd offers a distance learning educational experience. Our goal is to accommodate and encourage lifelong learning in the South African labour force: employed, unemployed and discouraged job seekers.

Optimi College is committed to providing a learning experience that is inclusive and accessible to all students. We offer equal opportunity and participation for students with special needs or disabilities and are equally committed to promoting fairness, dignity, and equal treatment for all individuals, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, socio-economic background, language, sexual orientation, age, or any other status protected under South African law.

The need to identify and support learners with special needs is noted in the following SAQA statement:

*“In respect of ensuring a quality experience for all learners, learners’ special needs need to be considered in the design of course and learning support materials, assessment arrangements and communication with teachers, tutors, lecturers, educators or trainers. Learners with special needs also need to be considered in the design of the institution which should be relevant to the form of delivery of learning programmes” (INSETA, 2014).*

Furthermore, Chapter 2 of the South African Constitution (1996), the Charter for Human Rights, guarantees the fundamental rights of all South African citizens. In the equity clause, it stipulates the right to freedom from discrimination. The Charter describes some social criteria, one of which is described as discrimination based on disability. This protection extends to all forms of discrimination, including those based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, or other identity factors. Within this context, no individual may neither directly nor indirectly be discriminated against on the grounds of a disability (Stellenbosch University, 2005).

## 2. PURPOSE

Optimi College recognises the individual needs of students. Student support forms an essential part of student progression toward completing a qualification successfully. Therefore, the rights of students with a disability or special needs must be fully appreciated to ensure that students have the opportunity to participate fully and engage in the learning journey.

Our view of the student journey includes the admission and enrolment process, participation in subjects and courses and use of Optimi College facilities and online services.

In addition, Optimi College affirms its responsibility to eliminate barriers to participation and ensure equality of opportunity for all students, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, culture, sexual orientation, or socio-economic background. This commitment extends to fostering a respectful and inclusive learning environment that values diversity in all its forms.

Optimi College is committed to considering the circumstances of all students with a disability or special needs towards granting them access to our learning environment in the same way as we offer our learning environment to students without a disability or special needs.

## 3. SCOPE

The Policy applies to all programmes, students and prospective students with disabilities and is supported by process and procedure aligned to the respective Quality Assurance Councils, Professional bodies and Institutions.

While the primary focus is on learners with disabilities and special needs, this policy also underpins Optimi College's broader commitment to equity, access, and non-discrimination for all learners. This includes preventing and addressing any unfair treatment based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age, language, or socio-economic status.

The policy will impact on all student-related policies and procedures.

## **4. PRINCIPLES**

Optimi College is committed to ensuring that all aspects of its learning environments—digital and physical—are accessible to students with disabilities. Digital content, including online learning materials, will be developed and tested for compatibility with screen readers, and other assistive technologies. Videos used in course content will include captions, and all images will have descriptive alt text. These provisions aim to create an equitable learning experience, allowing all students to access course content fully.

Optimi College adopts a standard of inclusive and respectful language across all academic and administrative communications. All learning materials, emails, and announcements will use people-first language and avoid ableist language, ensuring that all students feel respected and valued. Inclusive language training will be provided to all staff to support this initiative.

In line with our commitment to equality and access, Optimi College will:

- Promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all students, regardless of disability, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, age, sexual orientation, language, or socio-economic background.
- Ensure that no learner is subjected to harassment, victimisation, or discrimination on any prohibited grounds.
- Encourage diversity and cultural inclusivity in all learning and support initiatives.

Our aim is:

- To promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by its students with disabilities;
- To provide a learning environment that supports and enhances the College experience for students with a disability or special needs;
- To support and encourage a learning environment free from harassment and discrimination;
- To allow access for students with a disability or special need to appropriate support services;
- To advocate the provision of reasonable adjustments to accommodate the needs of students with a disability or special need with the respective QA Councils, professional Bodies and Institutions (United Nations, 2008).

## **5. GUIDELINES AND PROCEDURES**

The following guidelines and procedures outline Optimi College's approach to ensuring fair treatment, accessibility, and inclusivity for all students. While these procedures place specific emphasis on accommodating learners with disabilities and special needs, they are underpinned by a broader commitment to equality, diversity, and non-discrimination for all individuals. This includes, but is not limited to, protection

against unfair treatment based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, age, language, sexual orientation, or socio-economic background.

Our procedures are designed to:

- Remove barriers to participation in academic and student life.
- Provide reasonable and practical adjustments that enable all students to engage fully with their learning journey.
- Ensure transparency, confidentiality, and respect in all processes related to disclosure, support, and accommodation.
- Maintain academic integrity while upholding the principles of equity and inclusion.

Through these measures, Optimi College strives to create a learning environment where every student, regardless of personal circumstances can access opportunities, resources, and support on an equal basis.

The resolution process for academic and administrative complaints and grievances is conducted in two phases:

## **5.1 Disclosure Of Disability / Special Need**

During the initial registration process students are invited to self-disclose a disability or special need to the Optimi College Educational Planner (EP). It is the responsibility of the student to register with the Educational Planner.

The disclosure of a disability or special need is not a pre-request during registration but would be an the advantage of the student going forward. A student can never be required or obligated to disclose their disability or special need. If the student chooses to disclose at a later stage during their studies, they can do so at any time by contacting their lecturer or the student support staff with reasonable notice to the College.

Optimi College is a private educational institution and would, therefore, need the appropriate documentation to validate the students' disability or special need(s). Therefore, it would be a prerequisite that written confirmation of the disability or special need is submitted to Optimi College by a specialised medical professional.

The POPI Act guides the collection, processing, and retention or destruction of personal information. Under the POPI Act, Optimi College ensures the protection and confidentiality of all students' private information and disability disclosures through secure procedures. Disclosure will only take place under specified conditions, and with the student's consent or when it relates to the health and safety of the student and others and when reasonable accommodation is requested. Withdrawal of disclosure can be requested at any time, upon the student's disability record and relevant documents will be removed.

All information provided by students regarding the disability or special need will remain confidential and restricted to a need to know basis within all permanent and contracted staff within Optimi College.

The Optimi College is not obligated to provide adjustments for a student who chooses not to disclose a disability or special need.

## **5.2 Reasonable Adjustment**

Optimi College will provide flexible learning and assessment options where possible to support students with disabilities. This may include extended deadlines, alternative assessment formats, or other necessary accommodations. These adjustments aim to balance academic integrity with the individual needs of students, allowing all students equal opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

Each student registered as a disabled or special need learner will be reviewed individually. Optimi College supports each case within its merit and reasonable adjustment.

When modifying learning resources or assessment conditions, Optimi College will focus on increasing the learner participation and experience, without compromising the academic standard or requirements of the qualification.

For this reason, Optimi College will adhere to the detailed policies and procedure stipulated towards satisfying the regulatory requirements of the three sub-frameworks represented by the following Quality Assurance Councils:

- The Quality Council for General and Further Education and Training (Umalusi)
- The Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QTCO) - This would include the Quality Assurance Partners

Practical and reasonable adjustment to a Optimi College procedure will be considered on an individual basis, taking into consideration the student's learning needs, including those of Optimi College, staff, and other students.

## **5.3 Responsibilities**

Optimi College provides a distant learning as well as a face-to-face classroom environment for their students.

Optimi College is committed to informing students about available support services throughout their educational journey. During orientation, and at regular intervals, students will be provided with information on how to access accommodations, support staff, and other resources relevant to their learning needs. This ensures that students know the support mechanisms available to them and can access these resources promptly.

Regardless of Optimi College methodology, the importance of providing physical access to buildings and other facilities is regarded as both important for students and employees.

In unforeseen cases where Optimi College cannot meet the need of a student's disability, an alternate arrangement for services will be provided, e.g. when, in future, examinations are conducted on the Optimi College premises.

Optimi College will maintain and improve where possible the level of accessibility to existing buildings.

Optimi College requires that all staff—permanent and contracted—complete regular training on inclusivity and disability awareness. Training will focus on empathy, practical support for diverse needs, legal responsibilities, and creating an environment that embraces diversity. By empowering staff with knowledge, Optimi College aims to foster a respectful and supportive learning environment for all students.

## **5.4 Exceptions**

Optimi College registration process and procedures (Educational Planners) make provision for students to disclose any disability or special need.

Optimi College is not obligated to make any adjustment or accommodation that may impose an unjustifiable hardship on the College.

Optimi College cannot compromise the academic standards or inherent requirements of a course.

## **5.5 Roles & Responsibilities**

Optimi College upholds a zero-tolerance policy toward discrimination and harassment based on disability or special needs. Any violation of this policy by staff, students, or contractors will be addressed promptly through appropriate disciplinary procedures. Optimi College is committed to fostering an environment where all students feel safe, respected, and valued.

Optimi College maintains its responsibility to:

- Ensure that this policy is made available to all staff, both contracted and permanent.
- All staff receive training regarding the policy and procedures.
- Ensure that this Policy is implemented and applied consistently across the Optimi College learning environment.
- The policies and procedures of Optimi College are aligned to the requirements of Quality Councils, Professional Bodies and Institutions.

## **5.6 Complaint or Grievance**

- Refer to Student Grievance Policy available on the website

## **6. FUNDING**

Optimi College acknowledges that creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment may require additional resources beyond standard delivery costs. While priority is given to accommodating students with disabilities and special needs, this principle extends to addressing barriers faced by any student due to factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, age, language, sexual orientation, or socio-economic circumstances.

Each case will be considered individually, assessing the specific adjustments or resources required to enable equal access and participation in learning. These needs will be balanced against the College's budget, the Terms of Registration, and the principle of reasonable accommodation, ensuring fairness, sustainability, and academic integrity in all funding decisions.

## **7. POLICY REVIEW**

The Policy on Development and Review of policies provide guidelines for the formulation, development, and review for Optimi College policies and procedures. The review date on the Policy Dashboard will initiate the review process owned and managed by the Review Manager. The Review Manager will delegate the policy and review deadline to the Policy Owner for analysis. The review process is implemented following Stages One to Five of the guidelines. Optimi College policies are reviewed on an annual basis or if changes in legislation or qualifications.

The Review Manager coordinates the new policy development process and the review of policies on an annual basis, in collaboration with the Policy Owner or subject matter expert. The Review Manager ensures that the



necessary document management process is maintained in the Policy Master File, both printed (Accreditation and QA Specialist) and online (QMS Final Policies). The Review Manager submits all new and updated policies to the Academic Committee for final approval. The Review Manager is the person who is responsible for maintaining the Policy Management Dashboard (PMD) and reporting on this at Academic Committee Meetings.