

Quality standards for Flexible and Distributed Learning (including distance, e-learning and blended learning)

Introduction

1 The University defines flexible and distributed learning (FDL) educational provision as that leading to an award, or to specific credit toward an award, of an awarding institution delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through means which generally do not require the student to attend particular classes or events at particular times and particular locations.

2 Given the nature of such programmes, the planning and approval processes require consideration of factors additional to those normally the focus of course planning and approval, and some more standard issues require particular attention because of the nature of the delivery method.

3 The [QAA Quality Code for Higher Education, Chapter B3 Learning and Teaching](#), sets out indicators of sound practice relating to the delivery, learner support, and assessment of students; these apply equally to FDL courses. Chapter B10 Managing HE provision with others, may also apply where some aspect of student support is provided through a third party arrangement. This document sets out requirements relevant to the approval of FDL programmes in relation to University processes and procedures and provides guidance for course teams and for those involved in course approval and review.

4 There is a wide range of arrangements that can fall under the definition of FDL and these may or may not involve partners in delivery and/or support. Most such programmes include some face to face teaching and learning, and are often referred to as 'blended learning'. There is no 'volume of FDL' above which this document applies and below which it does not; however, programmes where students spend a significant period of time studying as individual distance learners, are likely to fall under this remit. It is for course teams in conjunction with AQU officers, to ensure consideration has been given to the applicability and relevance of the quality standards to the specific course proposal.

Course Planning and Approval Processes

5 Plans for programmes delivered principally through FDL methods, including plans to develop an existing course to be delivered via FDL, should be fully costed for planning approval purposes through the Academic Portfolio Committee. This includes consideration of resources for staff time to develop materials and learning activities, external peer review, production costs of materials, marketing and publicity, running costs, including administrative costs etc.

6 The approval process should include individuals with expertise in FDL, who will have access to sample learning materials and activities. Normally one of the two external advisers will have experience of FDL.

7 Learning materials and activities, whatever the mode of communication and delivery (print or electronic) should be subject to quality assurance processes. It is not necessary for all materials to be available at the point of approval but arrangements for ongoing quality assurance of the learning materials and activities, including provision for peer review, should

be detailed and agreed as part of the approval – this should constitute an annexe to the course handbook.

8 The University, through the AQU, will maintain an up-to-date and authoritative record of modules and programmes delivered principally through FDL.

Quality Standards

The following quality standards are a guide and checklist for course development teams and a reference point for staff involved in course approval and review. Course teams should ensure that the standards are reflected in the course handbook. In order to assist the approval process, course teams will be asked to provide hyperlinks to relevant sections of the course handbook, or a short statement against each of the quality standards to demonstrate how they have been addressed.

1 Programme design and delivery

- 1.1 The reliability of the delivery system for the programme must be assured, and it must be fit for purpose. The University's VLE meets this requirement for most purposes. If other than the University's VLE, there may need to be clear contingency plans in event of failure of the designed mode of delivery.
- 1.2 There must be secure and reliable means for the delivery of study materials and a means of confirming safe receipt. This includes consideration of student access to appropriate facilities for receipt of materials.
- 1.3 Learning materials and learning experiences should be designed to facilitate active and interactive learning.
- 1.4 Staff developing programmes delivered through FDL should have appropriate skills in the design and delivery of FDL programmes, and receive appropriate training and development to support effective practice in FDL.
- 1.5 There should be effective administrative procedures in place to support programmes delivered to students who are learning at a distance from the University.
- 1.6 There should be clear procedures in place for reviewing and updating the learning materials and learning experiences, and for approving materials scheduled for future production.

2 Information for students

- 2.1 The relative responsibilities of the University, the student and any collaborative partner, eg in terms of access to or provision of computing facilities (including technical specifications), requirements for residential and/or on-campus study, should be specified to students in advance of the commencement of the programme.
- 2.2 Students will be provided with clear information about the modules/units, learning outcomes and learning, teaching and assessment methods that make up the programme of study via a programme specification, module outline and student handbook.
- 2.3 Students will receive clear explanations of the realistic expectations placed upon them for elements of study and the nature of autonomous, directed, collaborative and supported learning.

- 2.4 Students must be provided with up-to-date information about the learning support available to them locally and/or remotely.
- 2.5 Students will receive a schedule for:
- the delivery of study materials
 - any learner support through timetabled activities, web-based conferences etc
 - completion of learning activities, and
 - submission of formative and summative assignments.

Note: much of the above might be provided in the form of a learning contract for students, a draft of which should be available to students before they enrol for the course. Alternatively relevant parts may be provided in the form of pre-course information and the student handbook.

3 Student support

- 3.1 Students should receive appropriate training in the use of computing and media facilities (eg VLE, video conferences, Skype, other ITC) as appropriate.
- 3.2 Students should have an identified contact (local or remote) together with clear arrangements for contact (via email, telephone, fax or post) to provide constructive feedback on academic performance and authoritative guidance on their academic progression.
- 3.3 There should be clear operating standards for the programme, eg assignment and query turn-around times.
- 3.4 There should be clear mechanisms to collect student feedback on the programme and other aspects of the student experience. It should also be clear who is responsible for processing the feedback and providing a response to students.
- 3.5 Students should normally be provided with opportunities for inter-learner discussions about the programme to:
- facilitate collaborative learning
 - participate in the quality assurance of the programme, and
 - facilitate student feedback on their experience of the programme.
- 3.6 There should be clear arrangements for students studying at a distance from the campus, to access learner support, careers guidance and all other student support services.

4 Assessment

- 4.1 Students should have opportunities for structured and timely formative assessment, and receive constructive and timely feedback, in relation to learning outcomes and academic progress through the programme.
- 4.2 Students should be provided with clear information on the arrangements for formal assessment. Such arrangements must be secure and reliable and take account of timezones, location of examination centres, supervision and security of assessments, and submission of assessments as appropriate.
- 4.3 There must be robust systems in place to permit students to confirm that their assessed work has been received safely and within the deadline.

- 4.4 There must be arrangements in place to identify and deal effectively with fraud, plagiarism and impersonation in order to ensure that students' assessed work can be properly attributed to them.

Version 3
Date of approval Academic Board, 25th April 2012
Date comes into effect Immediate
Author of document Director of Quality and Educational Development
Date for review 2016/17

Revision History

Committee	Date	Change
N/A	July 2014	Document reviewed to remove references to the section of the QAA Quality Code that has now been replaced by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education Chapter B3 Learning and Teaching. No changes to substance of document made.