

Code of Practice on Distance Learning

1 Introduction

1.1 Definition

- .1 Distance Learning is a mode of study in which there is little or no requirement to attend campus in order to study for, or take part in assessment for University credit.
- .2 A programme will be defined as Distance Learning if it meets the above criteria, even when students are required to:
 - (a) Attend campus in order to undertake assessment;
 - (b) Attend campus for induction/re-induction; and/or
 - (c) Attend campus for intensive teaching/lectures/workshops.

1.2 Scope

- .1 This document applies to:
 - (a) Teaching and learning that bears credit only, and therefore does not cover materials made available by 'open access'.
 - (b) Taught and research programmes and modules whether delivered by the University or via collaborative organisations, and to full time and part time modes. Further details on the nature of the University of Birmingham Distance Learning PhD can be found in Appendix A which is supplementary and subordinate to this Code of Practice.
- .2 This document does not apply to:
 - (a) Students studying via flexible mode, as these students attend campus in the usual way, albeit over an atypical timeframe or study pattern.
 - (b) Placement learning, nor Split Location Study, for which there are separate definitions and codes of practice (WWW to go here).

2 Approval

- 2.1 The University, through the Programme Approval Review Committee, is responsible for approving new undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes, and postgraduate research programmes with taught elements, including those which are to be Distance Learning. College Education Committees, or their equivalents, are responsible for approving Distance Learning programme elements.
- 2.2 The University Programme Approval Committee will accept proposals as follows:
 - (a) New taught Distance Learning programme: Schools are required to complete the New Programme Approval process, which includes the submission of a Plan to Develop a New Programme form, followed by a Programme Proposal and Programme Specification. The Distance Learning Checklist must also be completed and submitted to the Committee along with the New Programme Proposal.

- (b) Delivering an existing campus-based taught programme as a Distance Learning programme: Schools should submit a New Programme Proposal and include the Distance Learning Checklist.
- 2.3 College Education Committees, or their equivalents, will accept proposals as follows:
- (a) Introduction of a taught Distance Learning element to a campus-based programme: Schools should complete the New Module Proposal form along with the Distance Learning Checklist.
- 2.4 In the case of research-only programmes proposals, including the Distance Learning Checklist, must be reviewed and agreed by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) and the Director of the Graduate School, before submission to University Programme Approval Review Committee for approval.
- 2.5 These forms, and guidance on completion can be found on the Curriculum Development Unit web pages: <http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/cdu/>.
- 2.6 When seeking approval for Distance Learning programmes, or programme elements, Schools are required to address the requirements set out in sections 4-10, as appropriate.
- 2.7 Where the programme will be supported or delivered by a collaborative organisation, agreement in principle must first be gained from the Collaborative Provision Committee. Once full approval has been gained a legal agreement must be drafted and signed by all parties before commencement of the programme.

3 Review

- 3.1 The University, through the Quality Assurance Committee, is responsible for ensuring the quality and standards of Distance Learning through oversight of the Annual Review process.
- 3.2 Schools should review their Distance Learning provision as part of the Annual Review process. Assessment of Distance Learning modules should be subject to scrutiny by External Examiners in line with The External Examiner System for Taught Programmes. Further information regarding the Annual Review and External Examiners processes is available from the Academic Quality Unit: <http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/aqu/>.
- 3.3 There should also be mechanisms in place, via module evaluation for example, to solicit feedback from current and former students to ensure the quality and standards of the programme. Schools are required to ensure they have reviewed the Policy on Student Representation and received agreement from their College and the Student Representation System Advisory Board for any required amendments to the standard model of representation in light of the particular needs of their Distance Learning students.

4 Academic Programme and Management

- 4.1 Strategic Fit

- .1 Development of all programmes and modules requires resource and consequently ongoing commitment from staff. The resource requirements for development of a Distance Learning programme may indeed be greater than for some on-campus programmes. For this reason it is important that the development aligns with the School and College strategies before significant work is undertaken on the proposal.
- .2 Where the development involves collaboration with an external organisation, strategic fit between the University and the collaborative organisation will be a significant consideration for the University.

4.2 Resource Allocation

- .1 Consideration of the staffing resource allocated for Distance Learning activity is essential. While students might not visit campus for scheduled learning activities, much time will be spent managing correspondence and updating/reviewing the relevant elearning tools and resources. This is in addition to the typical tasks associated with managing a programme or module, such as marking, feedback and annual review.
- .2 There might be specialist or specific hardware and software used for the learning activities associated with delivery of the programme which will carry ongoing as well as one-off monetary costs.
- .3 Staff who provide support to learners should have the appropriate skills, and receive appropriate and ongoing training and development.
- .4 Consequently, financial viability of the programme must be clearly demonstrated at the approval stage.

4.3 Administration

- .1 Schools must contact the relevant sections of Corporate Services at the earliest opportunity to discuss any elements of the programme which might not fit with the usual University administration cycle. This might include discussion with Strategic Planning where a programme start date is after the census date, or where there are multiple cohorts per year, or discussion with Student Records or Graduate School where student processing might differ from the standard.

5 Academic Requirements

5.1 Admission

- .1 All admissions to the University will be managed in line with the Code of Practice on Admission of Students. Academic and English Language requirements for entry to a programme are set by the School and scrutinised by Admissions at the point of application. When setting these requirements Schools are advised to consult with Admissions, and consider how these requirements might vary from similar campus-based programmes, particularly due to the limited English Language support available to Distance Learning students.
- .2 Any additional admission requirements which are set by the School are subject to scrutiny by the School at the point of application. Additional admission

requirements, such as evidence of ability to study independently, are particularly important for postgraduate researchers, for which a 'Checklist to Accompany an Admission Decision Form' must be completed and approved by the supervisor and Head of School prior to any admission offer letter being sent to the applicant. The form must include detail of how the applicant has demonstrated:

- (a) Evidence of the ability to study and undertake research independently;
- (b) A minimum technological requirement e.g. the proficient use of Skype or Facetime;
- (c) The suitability of the chosen residency location for research; and
- (d) The reasons for Distance Learning rather than the standard mode of study.

5.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

- .2 In the development of Distance Learning programmes, Schools should ensure that the intended aims of the programme can be achieved at a distance, and that the relevant learning outcomes of taught elements can be adequately assessed.
- .3 The Information Classification Standard is used within the University, which may result in certain resources having limited online availability, i.e. because they are Confidential or Highly Confidential. Schools will ensure that any information they intend Distance Learning Students to access remotely, can indeed be accessed in this way.
- .4 Thought should also be given to other learning opportunities that could be afforded to distance learners, for example use of social media to bring together student groups, or utilisation of libraries and other resources local to the student.

6 Provision of Resources

6.1 University Resources

- .1 Students following Distance Learning programmes or modules have access to all of the support services afforded to on-campus students. These include:
 - (a) Membership of the Guild of Students, and access to its services;
 - (b) Access to counselling and guidance services, disability and learner support services and the Chaplaincy;
 - (c) Access to the personal tutor and welfare tutor system;
 - (d) Access to the Senior Tutor; and
 - (e) Information on the student representation system and how to get involved.

6.2 Learner Support

- .1 Students following Distance Learning programmes, as fully registered students of the University, will have access to the University's computing and library facilities. eLibrary and the services provided by Library Services to Distance Learning students will be of particular importance, as will any resources offered through the University's Virtual Learning Environment.
- .2 Postgraduate Researchers conducting their research via Distance Learning will have full access to the University's Graduate School and the training and support provided by this team.

- .3 Schools will ensure that students following Distance Learning programmes or modules have access to academic guidance and support at a similar level and frequency as similar campus-based students.
- .4 Distance learning is likely to be delivered via a variety of means across the University, and within a single programme, depending upon the specific learning being undertaken. Whatever system (which might include traditional hard-copy correspondence) is being used, the School will ensure that:
 - (a) The delivery system is fit for purpose, has an appropriate availability and life expectancy, and has had its reliability tested;
 - (b) Effective contingency plans are in place should the system fail;
 - (c) The delivery of any study materials direct to students remotely through, for example, e-learning methods or correspondence, is secure and reliable, and that there is a means of confirming its safe receipt; and
 - (d) Study materials provided for Distance Learning meet the University's expectations in respect of the quality of teaching and learning materials.

6.3 PhD Supervision

- .1 Supervisory arrangements for Distance Learning postgraduate researchers will be equivalent to those enjoyed by similar students studying by other modes, as stated in the Code of Practice on Supervision and Monitoring of Postgraduate Researchers. The primary difference will be that postgraduate researchers conducting their research by Distance Learning will participate in their supervisions via visual communication media such as Skype or Facetime, instead of on an 'in-person' face-to-face basis. Supervisors must be fully aware of the commitment required of them for supervision at a distance. The time and commitment for supervisors will be not less, and may even be more than for campus-based supervision.
- .2 Monitoring of progress will be equivalent to that for similar students registered on other modes of study; students will be expected to be in attendance at UoB for annual progress reviews. Exemptions for non-attendance at the annual progress review shall be granted by the University Research Progress and Awards Sub Panel, in which case the review will be held remotely via video conference.
- .3 Students and their supervisors will maintain a complete record of all correspondence between each other, including supervisory reports and a history of progress, using the online PGR Management System;

7 Provision of Information

7.1 Prospective Students

- .1 It is important that prospective students have a direct access to clear explanations of:
 - (a) The admission requirements of the programme, particularly where these include access to resources, hardware, and/or software and whether ongoing access to these is a requirement for continued registration on the programme;

- (b) The expectations, including time commitment, that would be placed upon them as distance learners;
- (c) The nature and extent of independent, collaborative and supported study contained within the programme;
- (d) Any requirement for attendance at any location at any time throughout the programme; and
- (e) Additional costs which might be associated with the programme such as travel and subsistence, or necessary provision for personal tutors to visit the student's location.

7.2 Induction

- .1 As part of the induction process it will be necessary for Distance Learning students to receive information specific to their programme of study and study mode. This should include:
 - (a) For taught programmes, or research programmes with taught elements, specifications for the programme of study and the modules contained within it, including the learning outcomes, teaching and learning methods, and the methods for assessment;
 - (b) For taught programmes, or research programmes with taught elements, information on the ways in which their achievements will be judged, and the relative weighting of modules of the programme in respect of assessment overall;
 - (c) For research programmes (with or without taught elements), research skills training, tailored project development planning, and agenda setting with supervisors;
 - (d) A clear schedule for the delivery of their study materials and for assessment or review of their work;
 - (e) A schedule for any learner support available to them through timetabled activities, for example tutorial sessions or web-based conferences;
 - (f) Clear and up-to-date information on the resources available to them as students;
 - (g) Documents that set out their own responsibilities as learners, and the commitments of the School;
 - (h) From the outset of their study, a supervisor (for postgraduate researchers) or personal tutor (for taught students), who can give them constructive feedback on academic performance and authoritative guidance on their academic progression; and
 - (i) From the outset of their study, an identified contact, either local or remote through email, telephone, fax or post, who will act as administrator for the programme.

7.3 Current Students

- .1 Throughout their programme of study, Schools will ensure that students have information about:
 - (a) The mechanisms for providing formal feedback on their experience of the programme, including access to external examiner reports, meetings with the external examiner, and interaction with the Student Representation System (see 3.3 for further information);

- (b) Opportunities for inter-learner discussion, both to facilitate learning and to provide a basis for facilitating their participation in the quality assurance of the programme; and
- (c) If the programme is delivered via a collaborative organisation, the respective responsibilities of the awarding institution and the programme presenter for the delivery of the programme or element of the programme, as set out in the legal agreement.

8 Assessment

8.1 Taught Elements

- .1 The methods of assessment used for any programme or module will vary depending upon the nature of the learning to be assessed. In the case of Distance Learning, the range of methods of assessment may be restricted if the students are not required to visit campus on any occasion. In considering the suitability of an assessment method, the School should also ensure that:
 - (a) The mechanism(s) used for the submission of work are secure and reliable, and that there is a means of confirming its safe receipt;
 - (b) Students assessed work is properly attributed to them, particularly in cases where the assessment is conducted through remote methods that might be vulnerable to interception or other interference;
 - (c) Those with responsibility for assessment are capable of confirming that a student's assessed work is the original work of that student only, particularly in cases where the assessment is conducted through remote methods; and
 - (d) Where the students are required to sit written assessments overseas, the management of the examination will be line with the University's Code of Practice on the Conduct of Centrally Coordinated Formal Written Examinations.
- .2 Once assessment has taken place the School will ensure that timely summative and formative feedback is provided to the students in line with the expectations of the Code of Practice on Taught Programme and Module Assessment. It is particularly important for distance learners to understand the School's approach to, and expectations for summative assessment.

8.2 Viva Voce

- .1 The examination of the thesis, as with all PhDs, will be held at the University, unless a request to hold it elsewhere or by video/telephone conference has been approved by the University Research Progress and Awards Sub-Panel. The School and the student will bear the respective costs of arranging suitable conferencing facilities in their locality.

9 Student Responsibilities

- 9.1 Students undertaking Distance Learning should be aware of their own responsibilities as well as those of the School. Specifically students will:

- (b) Understand and comply with University Legislation for example, Codes of Practice on Plagiarism, Reasonable Diligence and the General Conditions of Use of Computing and Networking Facilities¹;
- (c) Ensure they are aware of the schedule of learning activities, assessment deadlines and other important dates;
- (d) Maintain an accurate record of correspondence with the University, including receipts for submission of work;
- (e) Carry out their studies with diligence and inform relevant staff of any change of circumstances which might affect their ability to continue studying on the programme or module;
- (f) Maintain access to relevant hardware and/or software as specified in the admission requirements; and
- (g) Ensure that any visits to the University from overseas are completed in compliance with the requirements of the UK Government at the time of travel. More information can be obtained from the International Students' Advisory Service
<http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/studentlife/international/index.shtml>.

10 Responsibilities of Collaborative Organisations

- 10.1 Distance learning programmes may be delivered with the support of a collaborative organisation, for example a facilitator who is local to the students.
- 10.2 The University's Collaborative Provision Committee has responsibility for approving all new collaborative arrangements. Agreement in principle must first be obtained from the Committee before proceeding with the development of a collaborative programme or programme element.
- 10.3 A legal agreement between the University and the collaborating organisation must be in place before any student can be registered upon the programme.
- 10.4 The respective responsibilities of the University and the collaborative organisation will be set out in the legal agreement, and will be made available to students.

¹ The Code of Practice on Student Attendance and Reasonable Diligence continues to apply to Distance Learning students. Whilst Distance Learning students may be required to be in attendance for specified sessions, the term 'attendance' may also be taken to mean interaction with specified scheduled events, such as webinars or video conferences.