UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

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PRINCIPLES AND GUIDANCE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISTRIBUTED LEARNING (INCLUDING E-LEARNING)

Note: Distributed learning relates to provision delivered in a number of ways, but for the purposes of this guidance will relate to what is understood as 'distance learning' at the University of Birmingham.

1. Definition of Distance Learning (DL):

Where the student learns remotely and there is little or no face-to-face contact with University staff. This may include the traditional paper-based style or web-based delivery or a mixture of delivery arrangements. Assessment may also be delivered using these delivery methods.

A programme will be categorised as DL where its delivery meets these criteria.

The University currently operates a relatively small number of distance learning programmes, although programmes will often have elements of distributed learning, particularly in relation to e-learning. It is not envisaged that the number of distance learning programmes will increase significantly, though as indicated in the University's International Strategy, the University recognises the significant opportunities for internationalisation afforded by a growth in distance learning provision. The Academic Strategy has identified that:

> "*Development should build upon the core strength of delivery on campus in a wide range of research-active Schools having developed robust quality processes and a relatively comprehensive regulatory framework*"
>
> "*Distance learning, foundation degrees, dedicated part-time programmes are expected to be maintained only in niche areas of strength in our markets*".

Further, it is envisaged that programmes will increasingly be developed with distributed learning elements as modules or part of modules and this guidance will hopefully be useful when developing those elements. It is directed, however, mainly at whole distance learning programmes. It is important to ensure a consistent approach to the development of such programmes.

The following guidance provides support and information that will help in the development and approval of distance learning programmes, whether they are internal or collaborative programmes. Due to the nature of these programmes it is important to ensure quality and standards are maintained, in line with QAA requirements and standard University provision.

2. Principles for the development and design of DL provision

i. The development of new DL programmes should only be undertaken when agreed as part of the School strategic planning process, and where compatibility with the portfolio development strategy of the University has been demonstrated.

ii. The development of DL should focus upon using the experience of existing key areas of academic activity. It should be clear in the paperwork submitted for proposed new developments that liaison has taken place with key areas in order to pool experience and good practice.

iii. All DL provision should be fully costed, with an indication of the distinctive costs associated with the design and delivery of DL programmes (i.e. technological, set-up, administrative costs).

iv. All DL programmes should demonstrate conformity with School and University Learning and Teaching Strategies.

v. All DL provision should comply with the quality assurance requirements of the University of Birmingham, and the QAA (see below).

vi. Where it is proposed to deliver new provision mainly through distance learning, consultation should take place during the development of proposals with the relevant specialist support groups/personnel on campus (e.g. the LDU, E-Learning Strategy Working Group managed by the LDU, SDU, or IS). Indications of consultation should then be included in any submission for University approval. Where DL programmes involve collaboration with an external partner, the Legal Office should also be consulted.

3. Guidance for the Development of Distance Learning Programmes:

The development of distance learning programmes is time-consuming and will require extensive support to ensure the programme is of appropriate quality and standards and that materials are suitable. Approval of distance learning programmes will require additional information, compared to traditional programmes, relating to the planned mechanisms for:

- Delivery (with information about any e-learning material/electronic technologies necessary for the delivery of the programme, administrative costs);
- Medium and long term risk, relating to the maintenance or replacement of technology, which underpins the learning resources;
- Learner support, feedback mechanisms and learner support
- Assessment (including issues of examination security and learner identification)

The QAA precepts for DL provision should inform the design of all new DL programmes.
Good practice advice is also available from the SDU, LDU and CETADL.

I. QAA Precepts specific to Distance Learning programmes include:

Note: Read “collaborative institution” for “programme presenter”, and “distance learning programme” for “FDL programme”.

B1 Students should have access to:

- Documents that set out the respective responsibilities of the awarding institution and the programme presenter for the delivery of a FDL learning programme or element of study;

- descriptions of the component units or modules of an FDL programme or element of study, to show the intended learning outcomes and teaching, learning and assessment methods of the unit or module;

- a clear schedule for the delivery of their study materials and for assessment of their work.

B2 The awarding institution, whether or not working through a programme presenter, should ensure that students can be confident that:

- any FDL programme or element offered for study has had the reliability of its delivery system tested, and that contingency plans would come into operation in the event of the failure of the designed modes of delivery;

- the delivery system of an FDL programme or element of study delivered through e-learning methods is fit for its purpose, and has an appropriate availability and life expectancy;

- 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;

- study materials, whether delivered through staff of a programme presenter or through web-based or other distribution channels, meet specified expectations of the awarding institution in respect of the quality of teaching and learning support material for a programme or element of study leading to one of its awards;

- the educational aims and intended learning outcomes of a programme delivered through FDL arrangements are reviewed periodically for their continuing validity and relevance, making reference to the precepts of Section 7 of the Agency's *Code* on Programme approval, monitoring and review (2000), or any successor document.

B3 Prospective students should receive a clear and realistic explanation of the expectations placed upon them for study of the FDL programme or elements of study, and for the nature and extent of autonomous, collaborative and supported aspects of learning.

B4 Students should have access to:

- a schedule for any learner support available to them through timetabled activities, for example tutorial sessions or web-based conferences;

- clear and up to date information about the learning support available to them locally and remotely for their FDL programme or elements of study;

- documents that set out their own responsibilities as learners, and the commitments of the awarding institution and the support provider (if appropriate) for the support of an FDL programme or element of study

B5 Students should have:

- from the outset of their study, an identified contact, either local or remote through email, telephone, fax or post, who can give them constructive feedback on academic performance and authoritative guidance on their academic progression;

- where appropriate, regular opportunities for inter-learner discussions about the programme, both to facilitate collaborative learning and to provide a basis for facilitating their participation in the quality assurance of the programme;

- appropriate opportunities to give formal feedback on their experience of the programme.

B6 The awarding institution, whether or not working through a support provider, should be able to ensure that students can be confident that:

- staff who provide support to learners on FDL programmes have appropriate skills, and receive appropriate training and development;

- support for learners, whether delivered through staff of a support provider or through web-based or other distribution channels, meets specified expectations of the awarding institution for the quality of learner support for a programme of study leading to one of its awards.

B7 Students should have access to:

- information on the ways in which their achievements will be judged, and the relative weighting of units, modules or elements of the programme in respect of assessment overall;

- timely formative assessment on their academic performance to provide a basis for individual constructive feedback and guidance, and to illustrate the awarding institution's expectations for summative assessment.

B8 The awarding institution, whether or not working through a programme presenter or support provider, should ensure that students can be confident that:

- their 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;

- 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;

- any mechanisms, such as web-based methods or correspondence, for the transfer of their work directly to assessors, are secure and reliable, and that there is a means of proving or confirming the safe receipt of their work.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education incorporate distance learning (calling it distributed learning) into their Code of Practice for the Assurance of academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning) see http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section2/default.asp.

The Code of Practice should be the basis for the development of all collaborative and distributed learning programmes within the University.

II. Further Guidance:

The Learning Development Unit http://www.ldu.bham.ac.uk/. The LDU website also provides details of projects that are developing distance learning.

The Staff Development Unit http://www.sdu.bham.ac.uk/ can be approached to provide bespoke development activities for staff new to specialist distance learning skills, e.g. online tutoring, and general advice on successfully supporting DL students.

The Centre for Educational Technology and Distance Learning (CETADL)
http://www.cetadl.bham.ac.uk/

The Programmes and Modules Group
http://www.ppd.bham.ac.uk/progmods/pmg.htm

The External and Collaborative Programmes Section
http://www.studserv.bham.ac.uk/collab/index.htm

NOTE:
There are currently a minimum of 80 programmes categorised as DL on the University's student records system. Schools whose programmes are categorised as DL are:

- Business (Commerce)
- Education
- Historical Studies (IAHA)
- Humanities (English – CELS, and the Shakespeare Institute)
- Medicine (Psychiatry)
- Public Policy (International Development)
- Social Sciences (European Research Institute)