UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

**GUIDANCE ON DISTANCE LEARNING
(INCLUDING ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING)**

Index of points

1. Introduction

<u>Definitions</u>

1.1 This Guidance covers programmes of study which are not delivered on a University of Birmingham campus and/or face-to-face; typically they have little or no requirement for registered students to attend a University of Birmingham campus in order to study for, or take part in, assessment for University credit.

1.2 Distance Learning programmes typically include:

(a) Correspondence programmes (where materials are posted out to students).
(b) Fully Online programmes – usually delivered through the University's Virtual learning environment.
(c) Split Location Study for Postgraduate Researchers.

<u>Scope</u>

1.3 This Guidance applies to all teaching and learning that bears credit only, and therefore does not cover materials made available by 'open access' such as Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs).

1.4 This Guidance does not apply to Placement Learning, for which there is a separate Code of Practice:
https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/student/academic-support/registry/legislation/documents/public/cohort-legislation-2021-22/cop-placement-learning-21-22.pdf

2. Approval

2.1 The University's Quality, Enhancement, and Standards Committee (QESC) is responsible for approving new undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes and postgraduate research programmes with taught elements, including those which are to be delivered by distance learning. College Education Committees, or their equivalents, are responsible for approving distance learning programme elements.

2.2 QESC will consider proposals as follows:

(a) New taught distance learning programmes: 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 Modification to a Programme Proposal Form and include the distance learning Checklist.

2.3 When seeking approval for distance learning programmes, or programme elements, Schools are required to address the full resource requirements for design and delivery, to ensure that

full costings have been undertaken and that appropriate staff and resources are available so that the programme or programme elements run smoothly.

2.4   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 (see section 9 below).

2.5   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 the Graduate School where student processing might differ from the standard pattern. Where appropriate, advice and support should also be sought from Educational Enterprise.

3.   Academic Requirements

Admission
3.1   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.

3.2   Any additional admission requirements which are set by the School for either taught or research students, 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 whom a 'checklist' 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 electronic conferencing facilities;
(c)   the suitability of the chosen residency location for research; and
(d)   the reasons for distance learning delivery rather than the standard mode of study.

Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Support
3.3   In the development of distance learning programmes, schools should ensure that the intended aims of the programme can be achieved by the different mode and that the relevant learning outcomes of taught elements can be adequately assessed.

3.4   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

Restricted. Schools will ensure that any information they intend students on distance learning programmes to access remotely, can indeed be accessed in this way.

3.5   Thought should also be given to other learning opportunities that could be afforded to students on distance learning programmes, for example use of social media to bring together student groups, or utilisation of libraries and other resources local to the student.

3.6   Schools will ensure that all students on distance learning programmes have an identified Personal Academic Tutor and Wellbeing Officer. Postgraduate Researchers will be provided with support as specified in the Code of Practice on Supervision and Monitoring Progress of Postgraduate Researchers.

4.   Resource Requirements

University Resources
4.1   The University has a commitment to provide an equivalency for students following distance learning programmes or modules to 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 Academic Tutor and Wellbeing Officer system;
(d)   Access to the Senior Tutor; and
(e)   Information on the student representation system and how to get involved.

Learner Support
4.2   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.

4.3   Postgraduate Researchers conducting their research via distance learning will have full access to the University's Graduate School and appropriate training and support provided by this team.

4.4   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.

4.5   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. Guidance and support should be sought from the Director of Educational Enterprise as appropriate.

Research Degree Supervision

4.6   The arrangements and requirements for the supervision of research degrees undertaken by distance learning are set out in an appendix to the Code of Practice Supervision and Monitoring Progress of Postgraduate Researchers.

5.   Provision of Information

Prospective Students

5.1   It is important that prospective students have 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 students on distance learning programmes;

(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;

(e)   Additional costs which might be associated with the programme such as travel and subsistence, or necessary provision for Personal Academic Tutors to visit the student's location; and

(f)   Requirements for International Students.

Induction

5.2   As part of the induction process it will be necessary for students on distance learning programmes to receive information specific to their programme of study and study mode. This should include:

For taught programmes, or research programmes with taught elements:

(a)   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)   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;

For research programmes:

(c)   Research skills training, tailored project development planning, and agenda setting with supervisors;

For all programmes:

(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 Academic 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.

Current Students

5.3   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 8.4 below);

(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)   Where appropriate, 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, are set out in the legal agreement.

6.   Assessment

Taught Elements

6.1   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 programmes delivered by 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)   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.

6.2   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 that students on distance learning programmes understand the School's approach to, and expectations for summative assessment.

Oral Examination

6.3   Where an oral examination is required, this 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.

7.   Student Responsibilities

7.1   Students undertaking distance learning programmes should be aware of their own responsibilities as well as those of the School. Specifically students will:

(a)   Understand and comply with University Legislation i.e. Codes of Practice on Academic Integrity, Reasonable Diligence and the General Conditions of Use of Computing and Networking Facilities[1];

(b)   Ensure they are aware of the schedule of learning activities, assessment deadlines and other important dates;

(c)   Maintain an accurate record of contacts with the University, including receipts for submission of work;

(d)   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;

(e)   Maintain access to relevant hardware and/or software as specified in the admission requirements; and
        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 Student Team (IST)
        https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/student/international/Index.aspx

8.   Review

8.1   QESC is responsible for ensuring the quality and standards of distance learning provision through oversight of the Annual Review process.

8.2   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

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[1] The Code of Practice on Student Attendance and Reasonable Diligence continues to apply to students on AMD programmes. Whilst such 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.

Examiners in line with the External Examiner System for Taught Programmes. Further information regarding the Annual Review and External Examiners processes is available at: https://bham.sharepoint.com/sites/asr/SitePages/policyquality.aspx

8.3   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.

8.4   Schools are required to review the Policy on Student Representation and seek agreement from their College and the Student Representation System Advisory Board for any necessary amendments to the standard model of student representation in light of the particular needs of distance learning programmes.

9.   Responsibilities of Collaborative Organisations

9.1   Distance learning programmes may be delivered with the support of a collaborative organisation. The level of their involvement could vary depending on the relationship, ranging from marketing support, instructional design support, local facilitation, and first line IT support etc.

9.2   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.

9.3   A legal agreement between the University and the collaborating organisation must be in place before any student can be registered upon the programme.

9.4   Where appropriate, 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.