Guidance 3xxi   Guidance for the design of Distance Education

1. Introduction

The University is responsible for ensuring programmes provided at a distance are designed so that the academic standards are appropriate, and that the student experience is equivalent to that of students studying similar programmes at the University.

The following guidance relates to both in-house and collaborative partner Distance Education (DE) programmes.

2. Definition

A programme is defined as Distance Education (DE) if there is no requirement for the students to be in attendance on campus or other physical site for learning or teaching activities, or to access resources. All teaching, materials, and support are delivered at a distance and in most cases, DE is taken to mean programmes or parts of programmes explicitly designed to provide for students who are geographically removed from the university or partner institutions. Students studying on DE programmes may be resident in the UK or overseas.

DE programmes are usually facilitated and delivered to students online but In some cases, the University may also use local partners to support the delivery of the educational experience to students. All materials for modules to be delivered by DE, regardless of mode of delivery, should demonstrate a pedagogical model and an explanation and rationale for selecting this model should be provided.

DE includes:

- programmes that are taught fully at a distance
- and programmes where there is a combination of modes that enable students to study remotely from the campus, for example a blend of work-based learning modules, DE modules and modules taught face to face.

If a programme falls within the first definition, the programme team should provide one full module developed in distance mode. If a programme falls within the second definition, the programme team will need to provide a sample of content in DE format (or equivalent as negotiated with the Centre for Academic Practice Enhancement (CAPE) as part of the paperwork at the validation event. Email: CAPE@mdx.ac.uk

In both cases the team will be required to demonstrate the online content as part of the validation event. In this instance, the validation should preferably include a panel member with DE experience.

3. Range of Provision

3.1 Any DE programme/module offered by the University (as outlined above) and leading to academic credits and awards must be of demonstrable academic equivalence to programmes/modules taken by students following conventional modes of study. Such equivalence would relate to parity of academic standards;

it would be shown by the stated aims and outcomes of the programme/module, by the nature and demands of the content (syllabus) and by the rigour and appropriateness of the assessment (standards) when set against the aims and outcomes of this programme/module and against general expectations of programmes/modules at an equivalent level of study. It would also be shown in the nature of the learning support offered to the student, both by the University and by/via appointed local agents. It is only by such attention that the reputation of the University, and the worth of its awards, will be maintained.

4. Curriculum Design and Learning Outcomes

4.1 Any distance education programme/module should be designed with due regard to the University's Principles of Curriculum Design Policy.   This guidance incorporates key aspects. This will include the use of interactive activities and assessed materials to foster deep learning along with strategies to encourage the student to employ reflective learning.

4.2 In addition, the programme/module should enable and facilitate the development of graduate employability skills by embedding them in the modules at the appropriate level. The students must be provided with an explanation of them.

4.3 Each module will have clear and explicitly stated learning outcomes. It will also be clear that due consideration has been given as to how the learning materials are structured in order to support understanding and achievement of these learning outcomes and to encourage successful completion of the programme/module of study. This will include a description of the relationship between teaching strategy and learning outcomes.

5. Student Admission and Support

5.1 Students studying at a distance have a need for information that is particularly full and clear about all aspects of the programme/module they are undertaking. This information should enable them to make decisions about their own education and monitor both their learning and the quality of their educational experience and set out clearly their entitlements and responsibilities as a distance learning student. Higher education at a distance should be underpinned by the same principles that relate to higher education generally.

5.2 DE relies on a sound and effective logistical and administrative infrastructure to ensure that all participants' activities are co-ordinated and engage with the programme/module as designed by the provider. Administrative support is vital to the successful management of DE and there will have to be some level of a division of labour between teaching and administration activities. Faculties will have to decide on the minimum level of administrative support necessary to provide effective academic provision. Every programme/module will be required to have a *named* Academic lead (Programme Leader/Module Leader) and ideally a Programme Administrator.

5.3 Consideration will have to be given to the system put in place to support students:
1. how the students will be registered
2. the amount of face-to-face contact that will be provided (if any).
3. the balance of synchronous/asynchronous activity/communication

4. how students will be inducted to Library and support services
5. how cohort identity will be established, and cohesion achieved (opportunities for cohort interaction; introductions; community building activities; social events; student yearbook; alumni 'stories' etc.)
6. operating standards - e.g. assignment and query turn-round times
7. identifying and dealing with fraud, plagiarism and impersonation
8. what personal and career guidance will be available
9. how Academic Advisors will be assigned and support students.
10. how the support systems will be evaluated by both students and staff

6. Learning and Teaching

6.1 The learning materials are the principal way in which students interact with a DE programme/module. Their quality and pedagogical approach is of critical importance. Quality considerations are largely the same as those that would apply to any new programme/module proposal, but also embrace (or place extra emphasis upon) aspects related to the distance mode of provision. DE materials must incorporate, alongside the subject content, features equivalent to the interaction (questions, self-testing tasks, opportunities for collaboration) encountered in the face-to-face environment, plus elements of the support normally available to campus-based students. Additionally, the materials will need to be presented as a well-defined overall programme/module of study. In the absence of the confidence engendered by conventional staff-student contact, the materials themselves must convey to the student the nature of the programme/module. If presented cumulatively over a period of weeks, they must firmly be embedded into a given and fixed framework for the programme/module; they cannot be akin to 'lecture handouts' that the lecturer slowly reveals as a whole. They will also need to be of a high level of visual design and presentation.

6.2 Where programmes/modules are to be delivered internationally, special consideration will need to be given to the use of language and in particular to whether the English language used within a programme/module of study avoids the use of colloquialisms and whether it takes account of any culturally specific issues relevant to the countries in which the programmes/modules are to be delivered.

6.3 Students following a DE programme/module are entitled to student representation at a level determined as appropriate and realistic for students on the programme/module and they should be supplied with accurate information on this.

6.4 Careful consideration should be given to the amount of work demanded of students. It should be remembered that the notional time allowance per credit/module includes research, reading, online discussions and activities, and preparation of assignments and revision for assessment (it is helpful to include approximate timings as a guide for students). Students should not be overburdened and all programme teams are advised to bear in mind that one of the chief causes of non-persistence for DE students is the impression that they cannot cope with the requirements of their programme because it is taking them more time than indicated in the Module Handbook.

6.5 Where online discussions / group work are used, consideration should be given to linking these directly to assessment in order to actively promote and encourage participation by all students. Programme teams may even wish to consider making references to the online work compulsory in assessments in order to ensure participation.

6.6 Tutors on the programme may need training/support in facilitating online learning. The Centre for Academic Practice Enhancement (CAPE) can provide bespoke workshops on this. Email: CAPE@mdx.ac.uk

7. Resources

7.1 Authors of DE materials should have followed relevant guidelines and made use of the University's recommendations as outlined in this document, or other pedagogic templates. The University DE guidance is based on sound pedagogical principles for the writing of DE materials, and programme teams should be able to demonstrate that they have taken due account of these principles when writing programme/module materials. (Contact the CAPE team) Email: CAPE@mdx.ac.uk.
A discussion of different approaches to writing DE materials and further references can be found in the Jisc Guides section: https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides

7.2 Materials should be focused and presented as a well-defined overall programme/module of study embedded into a given and fixed framework for the programme/module and there should be a statement making explicit the basis on which the teaching media have been selected.

7.3 Due consideration should be given to the learning resources and the support that will be made available directly to the students from the providing institution and any assumed or required to be in place at the location of the student and any to be obtained by the student. These should be clearly specified.

7.4 As detailed in the requirements for validation, learning materials should be developed in consultation with CAPE. Email: CAPE@mdx.ac.uk.

7.5 Consideration should be given as to how the learning materials have been designed to be interactive and as to how the students will be given opportunities to receive formative feedback.

7.6 In order to ensure continuity, quality tutoring and also an equivalent student experience for all individuals and cohorts, facilitator's notes should be written to support the tutors facilitating the students' learning.

8. Curricula and Assessment

8.1 Learning materials should be interactive (including activities that engage with the lecturers/tutors, other students and the learning materials, asynchronously, synchronously or combination) and should include learning opportunities which allow the students to gain formative feedback on their progress. In addition, there should be some indication within the materials as to how summative assessments relate to the learning outcomes specified for the programme and/or module.

8.2 It is necessary that processes and systems should be devised for the feedback, review and evaluation of all components of a programme/module. It should be made clear to all parties how the resulting information is to be incorporated into both quality management and quality enhancement processes.

8.3 Explicit statements should be made as to how student progress will be monitored along with the nature and delivery of appropriate and adequate feedback. There should be an underlying rationale for the assessment strategy and a means of making it clear to the students enrolled on the programme/module. Both tutors and students should be clear as to the amount of feedback which is to be expected.

8.4 Due consideration will need to be given as to how assessments are to be administered when this is not carried out by Middlesex University. This may also involve a consideration of the appropriateness of assessment mechanisms to other institutions/countries and the issues surrounding assessment and teaching in languages other than English (if permitted by the University). In addition, decisions will have to be made as to how course work scripts of DE students will be made available to external examiners.

9. Staff Development

9.1 Staff development activities are important in ensuring quality delivery of DE and also in the retention and development of staff - both authors and lecturers. Consideration will therefore have to be given to the following in respect of staff employed part-time or on temporary contracts on DE:

1. whether (and how much) staff development will be offered to lecturers assigned to teach on DE programmes/modules and whether attendance is compulsory or voluntary
2. whether training for tutors is to be held at the start of the programme/module and/or every student intake
3. whether application AdvanceHE membership is to be encouraged and supported either financially or by the University offering a PGCert HE or CPD route
4. whether observations of face-to-face/online teaching are to be conducted and on what basis
5. whether online teaching is to be monitored and on what basis

10. Technical Issues

10.1 Whereas for conventional students the 'face' of the University is mainly presented by the tutors and others on campus with whom students work, for DE students the point of contact takes on a different form: the tutors in conjunction with the learning materials supplied by the University, the provided channels of communication, the nature of support made available to students, and (where applicable) local agents through whom (in whole or in part) the programme/module is provided.

It is imperative, therefore, that these infrastructure elements are of a high standard and are well-designed and well-planned, since there may be little or no opportunity with DE provision to make modifications once a programme/module is commenced. Equally, technical facilities essential to delivering and supporting

the programme/module, especially VLEs, must have the capacity and the robustness to handle the programme/module traffic with high reliability.

10.2   It is necessary that forms and lines of communication are identified, and where possible tested, within the constraints imposed by the timetable and, where relevant, time zones. Validation panels may also wish to consider whether the faculty has put in place systems for programme management, administration and academic procedures to include:

- registering the students
- identifying and dealing with fraud, plagiarism and impersonation
- operating standards – e.g. assignment and query turn-round times