

**GUIDE TO POLICY AND PROCEDURES RELATING TO THE
ASSURANCE AND ENHANCEMENT OF THE ACADEMIC
STANDARDS AND QUALITY OF TAUGHT PROGRAMMES
OF STUDY (THE 'RED BOOK')**

Quality Assurance Procedures for Taught Programmes of Study delivered wholly or partly via Flexible and Distributed Learning (including E-Learning)

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1. Introduction

Because of the increasing number of programmes of study which the University offers wholly or partly through flexible and distributed learning (FDL), including e-learning, it is appropriate to have in place a set of quality assurance procedures dealing specifically with such proposals. This is because the nature of such programmes demands that consideration is given to factors over and above those normally included in the planning, validation and review of traditional programmes. Further, some of the more standard issues encompassed by existing procedures deserve particular attention in the context of such programmes because the delivery method usually involves at least some physical separation of the learner from the campus-based support infrastructure and the partial or total replacement of conventional delivery methods by those drawing on resources designed especially for studying remotely from the institution. Thus, students studying remotely, whether for the whole or for part(s) of their programme, will rely more on printed or electronic study resources and on learning support made available to them through a variety of means, including static or interactive study guides and other resources and means of communication delivered in printed form, over the web, on C-D and by e-mail.

2. Definitions and Scope

2.1 'Flexible and distributed learning' is defined by the Quality Assurance Agency (*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) - September 2004*) as approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that:"

- i. do not require a student's place of study to be physically located within the institution (the awarding institution) whose academic award is being sought through successful completion of the programme of study;
- ii. do not assume that a student's programme of study is necessarily delivered directly by the awarding institution;
- iii. do not assume that a student is necessarily directly supported by staff of the awarding institution;
- iv. do not assume that a student is routinely working with other students; and
- v. do not necessarily require assessment of a student's achievement to take place at the location of the awarding institution. "

- 2.2 From the above definition, FDL can often be a feature of collaborative provision. Where this is so, then the University's *Quality Assurance Procedures for the Development, Approval, Operation and Quality Assurance of Collaborative Provision* will also apply.
- 2.3 The proportion of FDL within a programme can clearly vary from 100 percent in those programmes offered entirely remotely and which meet all of the conditions in 2.1 above, to programmes where only a small proportion of one module involves FDL and which might then only partly meet but one of the above conditions. These procedures are not intended to encompass programmes or modules using FDL to complement learning and teaching which is still essentially designed for, and relies on, 'conventional', campus-based, face-to-face delivery. However where FDL replaces conventional learning and teaching methods then it will be necessary to address the issues below, as applicable to the programme and/or module(s) concerned.
- 2.4 The learning resources ('published' in the University's name) and delivery mechanisms in FDL should be designed to form an integrated system providing the appropriate academic and intellectual challenge and student experience. The University is ultimately responsible for the quality of these aspects of provision and they are therefore given due scrutiny during validation and review events.
- 2.5 In this context, the University requires the implementation of procedures for evaluating the quality of FDL resources, prior to their consideration by any validation panel. These procedures must ensure internal and external peer review (including appropriate external accreditation), as well as routine correction, amendment, updating and periodic review and re-authoring.
- 2.6 The planning approval, validation, annual monitoring and periodic review of programmes (and modules) designed around FDL follow the core published procedures. There are, however, some differences of emphasis and additional requirements.

3. **Planning Approval**

(see also *'Academic Developments: Planning and Approvals Process'*)

- 3.1 Whether an existing programme is to be converted to FDL or an entirely new programme is proposed, planning approval is sought via the inclusion of the development within the School/Department-approved annual Academic Development Plan submitted to the joint Executive Team/Senate Academic Planning and Development Group each year. Following approval at this stage an Academic Development Approval form (ADA1) is raised by the School/Department and signed off by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) to authorise the next stage of development to commence. The ADA1 also serves to notify the relevant Central Services and Units of the impending development and they may anticipate consultation by Schools/Departments on relevant matters, e.g. validation, resources, administrative

requirements, or an institutional appraisal of any proposed new partner organisation.

- 3.2 The ADA1 includes a business plan stating how the necessary resources will be obtained for the programme and providing costs and income projections over a 5 year period. The items to be given particular attention in the business plan are:
- i. Staff time for the initial development of FDL resources, etc;
 - ii. Marketing and publicity costs;
 - iii. Quality assurance costs for approval of draft FDL resources (e.g. external peer review);
 - iv. Costs of collaboration with any external partner;
 - v. Production costs of FDL resources;
 - vi. Running costs following programme approval (tutorial, workshop, general support, IT overheads, administration, examination and assessment - including possible reviews of decisions of examination boards);
 - vii. Staff time for reviewing, updating and developing new FDL resources;
 - viii. Projected student numbers and associated income.
- 3.3 Other information to be supplied within the ADA1 will include indicators of centrality, quality, demand and comparative advantage which will justify the viability of the proposed development and its progression to academic validation.
- 3.4 The Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) may take further advice having received the ADA1 and engage in further consultation with the School/Department and others before authorising approval to proceed. Acceptance of the case at this stage means that the validation should not need to re-examine the strategic rationale or resource issues but can concentrate on academic standards and quality matters (particularly the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment, and student support), paying particular attention to the FDL resources and the strategic and operational arrangements for programme delivery at a distance.
- 3.5 Once planning approval is granted by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) by releasing a signed ADA1 form, then the Academic Quality and Standards Unit will include the proposal in the validation schedule and begin to make the necessary arrangements for the event.

4. Validation

(see also 'Validation Handbook')

4.1 The validation of FDL programmes is undertaken by a validation panel whose membership is provisionally determined by the Senior Academic Affairs Officer and the Head of Academic Quality and Standards before being put to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee for approval. Membership will include a Chair (from a non-involved subject area or from a Central Service Unit) selected according to the criteria published in the 'Validation Handbook'. Internal members are chosen from the available pool and will ideally have experience of operating and/or validating and/or reviewing FDL programmes. They will not be drawn from the subject area proposing the programme. External panel members are nominated by the School/Department and approved by the Pro Vice Chancellor; again they will preferably have experience of the development and/or operation of FDL programmes, as well as subject expertise. Practical arrangements for the event are provisionally determined by the Senior Academic Affairs Officer and the Head of Academic Quality and Standards before being considered by the Panel Chair and School/Departmental representatives at a planning meeting, arranged considerably in advance of an event.

4.2 The Validation Panel will normally receive the following documentation (in addition to the usual briefing papers):

- i. A copy of the ADA1, for information;
- ii. A Programme Handbook, specifying the practical arrangements in place for all aspects of the programme, encompassing the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment, student support and guidance, learning resources and quality management and enhancement. A delivery schedule for all learning resources and assessments should be included within the programme handbook. Details of the roles and responsibilities of staff within the University and any partner institutions should also be included.

In preparing the Handbook, due cognisance should be taken of Section 2: of the Quality Assurance Agency's *Code of practice relating to collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning) - September 2004* and the University's requirements for the *Content of Programme Handbooks (Annex J of the Validation Handbook)*.

- iii. Sample learning resources should be made available for that number of modules sufficient to secure a full semester's operation of the programme. If the materials are to be wholly or partly web-based, then a printed copy, extracts, or a summary of the materials may be required, depending on the amount of material and/or on the level of interactivity built into them. The precise requirements will be agreed at the planning meeting involving the Panel Chair and School/Departmental

representatives. Note that the Programme Handbook should give details of the mechanisms in place within the School/Department for the development and quality assurance of distance learning materials (see 2.4 above). The Validation Panel may approve the programme for a limited period, (including a succession of periods) conditional upon receipt and approval of further learning materials (see 4.5 below).

- iv. If applicable, details of any collaborative partnership(s) within which the distance learning provision operates. If this is the case, then the University's *Quality Assurance Procedures for the Development, Approval, Operation and Quality Assurance of Collaborative Provision* should be followed. Required information will include a draft contract which specifies the obligations of each partner in relation to their respective roles and responsibilities.
- 4.3 Validation Panel reports are produced as soon as possible and circulated to the Panel and the School/Department for comment and approval prior to submission to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. The conclusions, decision and any conditions and recommendations are made available in writing within two working days of the event and are also considered by the Senate at its next meeting.
- 4.4 The Validation Panel recommends whether the proposal should be approved and for what period. If the distance learning programme is leading to an award which continues to be offered through standard attendance, then the approval periods of the two programmes will normally be aligned according to the internal subject review schedule.
- 4.5 The quality of learning resources is a critical variable in determining the acceptability of a FDL proposal and the consequent student experience. The success of FDL programmes depends to a great extent on this factor. Thus, whilst learning resources for an entire programme of study are not routinely required at validation, an appropriate process for the ongoing review of learning resources must be incorporated within the validation process.
- 4.6 Should a Validation Panel have doubts about a FDL proposal, then it is entitled to exercise its right to approve resources for the entire programme, possibly in a staged process, before students are admitted and enrolled.
- 4.7 A non-exhaustive checklist of major issues to be considered at validation events for FDL proposals is included as Figure 1. The validation process should ensure that students are provided with appropriate information based on the details covered within this checklist.

Figure 1: **Aide Memoire for Validation and Review Panels considering programmes relying wholly or partly on Flexible and Distributed Learning, including E-learning**

(This aide memoire is designed to assist panel members in ensuring that the programme(s) and/or module(s) under scrutiny have addressed the relevant issues. Areas which are absent or unclear from the documentation should be followed up during discussions with staff and/or students).

<p>1. Curriculum</p>	<p>1a Are the stated aims and objectives of the provision appropriate?</p> <p>1b What is the pedagogic rationale for offering the provision via distance learning?</p> <p>1c Are the proposed learning resources clear and are they pitched at the appropriate level?</p> <p>1d Are the resources well-designed and well-presented?</p> <p>1e How will the resources be reviewed and updated and how often?</p> <p>1f Are satisfactory procedures in place within the School for approving the learning resources not examined by the Panel?</p>
<p>2. Teaching, Learning and Assessment</p>	<p>2a Is there a coherent teaching, learning and assessment strategy and do the resources support this adequately?</p> <p>2b Are there suitable opportunities to facilitate collaborative learning through student discussion?</p> <p>2c Does the assessment strategy include sufficient opportunities for timely formative assessment and feedback throughout each module?</p> <p>2d Are the arrangements for, and timing of, feedback to students appropriate?</p> <p>2e Have appropriate operational arrangements been made for assessment (e.g. for handing in and verifying student work, or to take account of different time zones)?</p> <p>2f What arrangements are in place to ensure work submitted for assessment by students adheres to the Unfair Means Regulations?</p>

	<p>2g Do the proposed programme regulations reflect and support the Programme Team's intentions?</p> <p>2h What arrangements are in place for External Examiners?</p>
3. Student Support	<p>3a What is the strategy for student support?</p> <p>3b Have practical arrangements been put into place (e.g. for dealing with individual academic queries as well as routine operational matters)?</p> <p>3c Is there a clear and accessible Programme Handbook?</p> <p>3d If IT is being used to deliver the programme, are students given clear information about the level of competence required?</p> <p>3e How is ongoing student support, student-to-student and student-to-tutor interaction organised?</p> <p>3f What arrangements are in place for seeking student feedback on the programme?</p> <p>3g What arrangements are in place for library provision for students at a distance from the institution?</p>
4. Other Operational Arrangements	<p>4a What pre-enrolment information is provided to prospective students in order that they are aware of the requirements and expectations in studying the programme?</p> <p>4b What are the arrangements for admissions and enrolment?</p> <p>4c Have the administrative systems been tested?</p> <p>4d What contingency arrangements are in place?</p> <p>4e Is the delivery of learning resources and assessments secure and reliable, and is a process for confirming receipt of materials to and from learners in place?</p> <p>4f If central University systems are not being used to support the programme, are details provided of system availability, vulnerability, life expectancy and fitness for purpose?</p>

<p>5. Collaborative Partnerships</p>	<p>5a Is there clear delineation of roles and responsibilities between the University and the partner (e.g. publicity, selection, admission, enrolment, fee collection, recruitment of local teachers, despatch of materials, record keeping, and administration)?</p> <p>5b What arrangements are in place for regular liaison (briefings, etc) between representatives of the partner organisation and University, at both academic and operational levels?</p> <p>5c Are lecturing staff from the partner suitably qualified and experienced?</p> <p>5d Are the facilities to be provided by the partner adequate (libraries, classroom accommodation etc)?</p> <p>5e What procedures are in place for quality assurance of the provision and have they been communicated to the partner?</p> <p>5f What arrangements will be made for joint staff development activities?</p>
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5. **Review**

(see also '*Guidelines for Internal Subject/Programme Review*')

- 5.1 FDL programmes are subject to the same review procedures as conventional programmes. Review Panels will be constructed according to the procedures outlined elsewhere in the 'Red Book' but, as with Validation Panels, experience of FDL provision will be one of the selection guidelines for panel members.
- 5.2 A Self Evaluation Document will be produced and approved by the School/Department, according to the guidelines currently in force, which will include an appraisal of the operation of the programme to date (in conjunction with the other programmes of which the subject is comprised, if they are being included in the review). Course Teams and Panels should pay attention to the checklist given as Figure 1. In particular, if the programme is offered in collaboration with a partner, then the *Quality Assurance Procedures for the Development, Approval, Operation and Quality Assurance of Collaborative Provision* should be followed in addition, requiring partner involvement in the review process and a contribution to the Self Evaluation Document.
- 5.2 Review Panels will operate according to the published guidelines, (including consultation with and/or scrutiny of feedback from students and employers, visits to facilities, etc). They will reach conclusions and a clear decision about continuing approval of programmes, for whatever period of time they deem appropriate, including any recommendations about matters for continuing attention by Course Teams.
- 5.3 Current FDL resources should be available to the Review Panel if they require it. The precise arrangements for provision of such resources will be discussed and agreed by the Chair of the Panel and School/Departmental representatives at the planning meeting held at the commencement of the review process.

6. **Annual Monitoring**

FDL programmes are subject to annual monitoring according to the current procedures. Where a programme is offered in standard and FDL modes, then an integrated annual monitoring report may be provided by the Course Team. Similarly, where collaborative partners are involved, then they should be involved in the monitoring process and should be invited to contribute in a manner and to an extent reflecting their role in the partnership.

7. **Student Feedback**

In any programme offered off campus, whether or not it depends on FDL, it is important to devise methods for securing regular and meaningful student feedback on the provision. When programmes involve students in little or no

face-to-face contact with University staff, then alternative methods of obtaining feedback must be sought (e.g. on-line module and programme questionnaires, on-line discussions, wikis, email, face-to-face feedback).

8. **Changes to Programmes in Continuing Approval**
(including the addition of new modules)

FDL programmes are subject to the published procedures for approval of major and minor changes (see section 4 and Annex B of the **Validation Handbook**). Distance delivery of an existing programme requires ADA, Course Committee and School/Departmental Board approval, followed by a validation event (see sections 3 and 4 above). Distance delivery of new or existing modules requires Course Committee and School/Departmental Board approval, followed by appropriate authorisation on behalf of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee using the prevailing procedures. In all cases, sample learning materials will be required as part of the approval process.