



Guidance note on Distance Learning Programmes

1. Introduction

These guidelines for distance learning programmes, including are based on the guidance note prepared by EAB (see References). It is noted that:

UK-SPEC does not limit accreditation to any particular mode of delivery; distance learning programmes are not excluded.

There is a number of distance learning MSc programmes now being submitted to JBM for accreditation. Hence the need for this guidance note.

2. Definition of distance learning

QAA's explanation of 'flexible and distributed learning' includes the following:

an approach to teaching, learning and assessment that does not require a student's place of study to be physically located within the awarding institution.....

..... and does not assume that a student is routinely working with other students.

In general, distance learning is a mode that does not require the student to attend particular classes or events at particular times or particular locations.

A wide range of programmes may be offered as distance learning, from whole degrees to individual modules. Residential students may complete distance learning modules/projects as part of the degree programme but the majority of the programme will be campus based; non residential students will follow a degree programme that is based on all distance learning/projects though there may be some residential modules to complete. These guidelines refer to distance learning that contributes in part or in whole to complete programmes.

3. Key principles

The same accreditation aims and standards apply to distance learning programmes as for any other type of programme, and are set out in UK-SPEC and Engineering Council's supplementary guidance. The effectiveness of any quality systems purpose built for distance learning should be assessed.

Assessment of distance learning assignments must be at the same level as any equivalent full or part-time programmes being delivered by the academic institution.

The academic institution should be notified as early as possible about any requirements for information, evidence or visit arrangements that are additional or different to those normally required for campus-based provision.

There is a requirement to train the Visit Team so that they can carry out accreditation of distance learning with a positive approach and without prejudice. The primacy of achieving

the learning outcomes should be stressed. The Team will be reviewing different types of material used for a course requiring attendance but these are no less valid.

4. Particular characteristics of distance learning programmes

The inherent flexibility of distance learning programmes that is often attractive to potential students can pose some challenges to established accreditation policies and procedures. Issues which may arise in relation to distance learning include:

- The open-ended nature of distance learning programmes
- The robustness of systems in support of students
- Project work and access to laboratories
- The involvement of a range of delivery partners
- More diverse student groups
- Individually tailored programmes
- Confirming the authenticity of the student

These should be taken account of these and any other aspects of distance learning provision when carrying out accreditation.

4.1 The open-ended nature of distance learning programmes

Accreditation of engineering degrees is framed by intake date.

In view of the pace of change in engineering and technology practice, concern has been expressed about students taking long periods to complete a distance learning degree, especially where the programme was accredited some time ago.

The length of time that students might take to complete a programme need not in itself be a barrier to accreditation if the required learning outcomes are still being delivered. However, to take into account the pace of change the programme must normally be completed within four calendar years in the case of MSc programmes. Note that it is the programme not the educational base that must be completed within four years. Academic institutions should be required to specify in their accreditation submission document the maximum length of time permitted for completion of their distance learning programme(s).

4.2 The robustness of systems in support of students

Programmes delivered by distance learning must be underpinned by a sound delivery platform. There must be evidence that the communications systems in place enable interaction between students and both their tutors and peers, so that distance learning students are not disadvantaged by comparison with campus-based students. There should be appropriate access to student, academic and administrative services, and timely feedback on assignments. It is expected that the platform will be a VLE or similar system. JBM will require access to this platform, and where appropriate in advance of a visit, as part of the accreditation process.

Greater emphasis will be placed on the delivery and communications systems, and academic institutions may be required to provide more detail about this than is required for campus-based programmes.

The views of distance learning students shall be included in student feedback and questions about distance learning shall be included. These may cover, for example, the quality of web-based learning systems and access to the library.

There must be a meeting with some distance learning students during the accreditation visit. It would be acceptable to make use of video conferencing facilities.

4.3 Project work and access to laboratories

Some learning outcomes for postgraduate programmes are most appropriately demonstrated by way of practical work. The JBM will consider a range of ways by which this may be demonstrated that need not necessarily be limited to campus laboratories. For example, work based distance learning students may be able to achieve the required standards through workplace activity.

There is a need for a greater emphasis on the systems in place to ensure that practical skills-based activities are developed, and it may be necessary for universities to provide additional material to demonstrate how distance learning programmes achieve the skill based outcomes of UK SPEC. This may include mandatory on-campus course components.

The same rigour and standards apply to the assessment of work based practical work as would apply to full-time campus provision.

Similar considerations apply to project work.

5.4 The involvement of a range of delivery partners

Engineering Council Regulations for Registration (26) include a requirement for an accreditation visit to all partner organisations, and this applies to distance learning provision.

The awarding institution is responsible for the academic standards of its awards and the quality of provision leading to them. The arrangements for assuring quality and standards should be as rigorous, secure and open to scrutiny as those for programmes provided wholly within the responsibility of a single institution and through conventional class-based modes of teaching.

An awarding institution may class as distance learning a programme that is in fact being delivered under a franchise agreement. Careful scrutiny of accreditation submission documentation should be undertaken to identify any mis-representation and ensure that appropriate accreditation activity is undertaken.

5.5 Multiple access points and more diverse student groups

The flexibility of distance learning is attractive to those who may not wish, or be able, to attend campus. Progression data and evidence for support of the extremes of cohort is required as for any degree programme. Levels of progression from one stage to another should be similar to those for a campus-based programme.

Universities are increasingly offering multiple entry points during the academic year and students may not move through distance learning programmes as a cohort. Therefore it is important that the intake point is the point at which the individual student enters the programme.

5.6 Individually tailored programmes

The open-ended choice of modules offered by some universities could lead some students to undertake MSc programmes whose design and content prevent them from covering all the required learning outcomes. Whilst this is not limited to distance learning provision, it may be a greater risk in this mode.

Students should be properly advised about module choice. Information about the flagging of groups of courses as providing particular pathways within an overall programme may be required. Please refer to the JBM guidance document relating to MSc programmes.

5.7 Confirming the authenticity of students

Robust systems must be in place to ensure that the work being assessed is the candidate's own work. This includes the use of recognised centres outside of the UK such as British Council offices; staff holding assessments in regional centres; candidates attending residential courses; on line visual oral assessments.