**Principles for Designing and Providing Distance Learning for Taught Programmes at the University of Bristol**

Faculties and Schools must consider and fulfil the following principles in the design and delivery of programmes by distance learning (defined as delivery of teaching and learning that takes place remotely from the University), whether as part of a programme or the whole programme. The University’s Programme and Unit Approval Process (<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/esu/approve/>) is also an essential reference point for the development of any unit or programme.

1. **Rationale for distance learning**

There should be a clear rationale for the development of distance learning. The pedagogical reasons for distance learning and how this would benefit students should be central to this rationale. Widening access, providing more flexibility to students and exploiting technology to deliver a course more effectively could also form part of the motivation. Distance learning could, for example, meet the needs of overseas students or part-time students who are in employment, or take advantage of technological developments. Appropriate market research should be undertaken to ensure that a similar programme does not already exist elsewhere and to identify student demand. Professional bodies may also encourage distance learning to meet identified needs in their field.

1. **Business Planning - Costing the programme**

Programmes containing distance learning require institutional support and resource, and should be fully costed at the design stage to ensure that the programme is sustainable. It is important that the cost drivers are well understood and incorporated into any planning process, acknowledging that the costs of distance learning programme are inherently different to campus-based programmes.

Distance learning can be an efficient use of resources. Upfront investment to establish the materials/content and the underlying support structures can result in savings once the programme is established, although experiences in other institutions have shown that it should not be perceived as a significant source of income. Proposals for distance learning must show how the initial investment will be recouped and how the ongoing maintenance will be covered in relation to planned student numbers (i.e. sustainability).

Plans should address:

* the start-up costs required to develop the materials/resources (including academic time) for distance learning, and how these costs will be recouped in relation to student numbers;
* the ongoing costs of the maintenance of distance learning material/resources;
* the ongoing administration costs of the programme in relation to the planned student numbers (acknowledging that a successful distance learning programme will normally incur significant additional administration compared to those taught exclusively on campus);
* the proposed tuition fee structure for distance learning programmes, and whether potential students are likely to be HEFCE, self or employer-funded;
* any issues with regards to copyright or the licensing of materials to go online; and
* how any educational collaborative arrangements will be developed (see Section 5).

There will also be costs incurred in providing an appropriate level of academic and pastoral tutor support and this should be explicitly covered in the plan.

Standards should be established by which the success/value of a distance learning programme is measured and monitored.

1. **Management Structure**

A management structure for the programme should be clearly defined with responsibilities attributed appropriately. A programme board may be established for this purpose. It is essential that the management structure for distance learning programmes is well organised, integrated, and consistent, with each member being aware of his or her responsibilities. No aspect of delivering the programme should rely solely on one person. There are implications for the whole student cycle, not just the teaching, with a distance learning programme. This puts a premium on the effective and efficient administration of the programme so a successful distance learning programme will necessitate extra administration, whether at School or Faculty level, or involving both.

1. **Student Support and Communication**

A specific structure should be established to address the needs of distance learning students, who will face different challenges from those who are taught exclusively on campus. Potential distance learning students may be from different cultures and backgrounds with different qualifications and educational needs, and this should be taken into account in the form and content of the curriculum, as well as in the support provided. Distance learning students should be made aware of the skills they will need, particularly around digital literacy, and how these skills can be developed and supported. Accessibility issues should also be considered, as it is important that students have access to equal learning opportunities.

Students should be made fully aware of how their programme of study will be delivered and assessed, and be provided with a clear schedule of its delivery and assessment. Similarly, students should be made aware of the academic expectations, as set out in the programme specification. Students should be informed of how they can access support services – including library, pastoral and academic support – and the student representation structure.

1. **Educational Collaborative Arrangements**

Other organisations may be identified to support distance learning programmes or to provide specific learning resources, such as laboratory space, regional support and examination venues. In all cases, collaborative arrangements for distance learning should be negotiated, agreed and managed in accordance with the University’s Regulations and Code of Practice for Educational Collaborative Arrangements.

1. **The Technology**

It is the pedagogy, rather than the technology for delivering the content, that drives distance learning. Technology can be used to facilitate communication and learning, and can help to foster innovative teaching methods and forms of interaction. The technology must map onto centrally-supported software, with an eye on scalability to accommodate increases in student numbers. The technology employed in distance learning must be centrally supported and be accessible to all the proposed users.

The technology for the delivery of distance learning, for receipt of work and for conducting on-line assessment must be robust, secure and reliable, and must be tested before use. Contingency plans must be in place in the event of any failure of the technology.

1. **Quality Assurance and Approval Processes**

The University’s Programme and Unit Approval Process must be followed for all units and programmes (<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/esu/approve/>). Chapter B3 *Learning and Teaching* of the QAA Quality Code is also an important reference point (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/B3.pdf>).

All new proposals for distance learning should be presented and considered in accordance with the agreed procedure for new programmes, including consultation with relevant support services such as the Library and the Student Systems Information Office. The proposal must be agreed by the relevant school/s and faculty/ties before being presented for approval.

Distance learning programmes should conform to the University’s internal quality assurance mechanisms and to the University’s regulations. A sub-set of regulations for such programmes may need to be developed where this is not possible.

1. **Curriculum Design and Delivery**

The delivery of teaching via distance learning will vary by subject, depending on the form of teaching and on the content to be delivered. The following points should however be followed wherever possible:

1. Programme teams should consider how the curriculum is delivered, whether in a blended format or entirely away from campus. Teams should consider whether students will be required to attend the University for an induction session and/or other taught components as a mandatory part of the programme.
2. Programme teams should consider how the learning outcomes from each unit, and those of the programme, will be assessed. Consideration should also be given to whether the forms of assessment can be conducted online (this will require that assurance can be provided that the assessment is completed by the student) or whether students will need to attend the University or another designated venue to take summative assessments.
3. Students should receive feedback on their formative assessment, in accordance with University policy, in good time to influence the next relevant activity or assessment, as set out in the Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught Programmes.
4. The programme specification should make clear to students the academic, pastoral and other support that is available to them in the School/Faculty, including an outline of how that support can be reached and a timeframe for when a student can expect to receive a response to a request for support. Students should also be informed of how they can access central services. Good student support structures will be vital; a student away from campus must be able to interact with his or her peer group and communicate with the University (for academic, administrative and pastoral reasons) and know they will receive a response in a set time. Cultural expectations also need to be considered particularly for overseas students, e.g. the relationship between student and tutor will need clear exposition.
5. Consideration should be given to how a dissertation project for a postgraduate taught distance learning programme would be incorporated and supported.
6. Teaching staff should have the appropriate skills and should be aware of the different demands and time commitments required to facilitate distance learning, including being available to respond to student queries.
7. In terms of the course design and the learning environment, there should be extensive information on what being a distance learner entails as well as links to resources and contact information. The course should be well-organised and easy to navigate through so that students are able to understand its overall structure and the individual components. Aesthetic design should aid the clear presentation and communication of online information. Student learning and accessibility could also be enhanced by providing multimedia elements. There should be a clear distinction between interactive activities and static resources.
8. Programmes should provide opportunities for students on distance learning programmes to foster a community of learners and for inter-learner discussions.
9. The experiences of students on a programme containing distance learning must be regularly monitored, evaluated and updated, where necessary, at the Annual Programme Review meeting. Parity in the quality of learning opportunities should form part of these considerations. Students should have appropriate opportunities to provide formal feedback on their experience.