

## Guidance note on Master's Level Distance Learning Programmes

### 1. Introduction

These guidelines for the accreditation of distance learning programmes, are based on the guidance note prepared by the Engineering Council (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 are a number of distance learning MSc programmes that have been 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 delivery, and are set out in UK-SPEC and Engineering Council's supplementary guidance.

There is a requirement for the JBM to train the Visiting 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.

As part of an accreditation visit the JBM visiting teams will need to look at the following areas:

- the effectiveness of any quality systems purpose built for distance learning should be assessed
- There must be a meeting with some distance learning students and recent graduates during the accreditation visit. It would be acceptable to make use of video conferencing facilities
- Programme learning outcomes should be identical irrespective of the mode of delivery
- It is expected that the delivery platform will be a VLE or similar system. JBM will require access to this platform, and where appropriate in advance of a visit.

- Examples of output from distance-learning candidates should be available for inspection by JBM visiting team. To ensure that there is evidence that the DL programme is being delivered and assessed in the same way as the campus-based programme. University confidentiality arrangements must permit this

#### **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, together with 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 be completed in compliance with university regulations and normally within four – six calendar years but no more than eight in the case of MSc programmes.

Academic institutions must specify in their accreditation submission document the maximum length of time permitted for completion of their distance learning programme(s). This is usually four calendar years for completion of the educational base.

##### **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. The 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.

### 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 will apply to project work, depending on the subject area of the dissertation.

### 4.4 The involvement of a range of delivery partners

The Engineering Council's Registration Code of Practice includes a requirement for an accreditation visit to all partner organisations section 27) and this applies to distance learning provision.

*“Where some of the programme is delivered by a provider or providers other than the awarding institution, the Licensed Member shall visit those provider(s) unless it can be assured by the awarding institution that systems are in place to ensure that the learning outcomes specified by the Licensed Member are being delivered by the provider(s); or if that part of the programme does not contribute to the final award.”*

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.

### 4.5 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 the same for all students irrespective of the mode of delivery.

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.

### 4.6 Individually tailored programmes

The Programme Specification for the Distance Learning provision has to be the same as for the Full Time or the Part Time provision and Learning Outcomes mapped against those in UK-SPEC.

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 completing a programme that has sufficient technical focus.

Students should be properly advised about module choice. Information about the flagging of groups of modules as providing particular pathways within an overall programme may be required. Please refer to the JBM guidance document relating to MSc programmes, module choice. In addition, the subject area of the dissertation is important for those students who are required to complete a technically focused MSc.

#### 4.7 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 could cover the following areas:

- the use of recognised centres outside of the UK such as British Council offices;
- Academic staff from the home academic institution holding assessments in regional centres;
- candidates attending residential courses;
- candidates taking examinations in the UK at the same session as their UK based fellow students
- candidates attending the awarding institution for a 'viva' of their final dissertation
- online visual oral assessments, where the identity of the candidate has been confirmed.

Visiting the UK home academic establishment will also give the student the experience of attending the University that will award them their degree

The following is an example of how one UK academic establishment ensures the identity of their overseas based students.

*“Students are required to provide a PDF of the passport or drivers licence where the photograph is on view. In the case of UK students this photograph will go onto their Student Record (SITS) file. This can be checked when the staff meet the students. All students that come to the University can get a library card that incorporates a photograph and this is displayed at the examination here at the University. Those taking exams overseas, where the centre has to be approved (British Council or tertiary education establishment), the centre will require them to have their library card, passport or pictured driving licence or similar with them. We send the external centre our photo record to cross check along with the exam paper and associated exam requirements plus specific instructions to follow should the exam be open book. With British Councils, they will mark the exam record if proof is not brought but will still let them sit the paper. Experience has also allowed us to develop a list of approved Centres“*