Policy framework for distance learning award-bearing PGT courses

Education Committee

Valid from Hilary Term 2016

Content

Preamble

The possibility of an expansion in the number of distance learning postgraduate award-bearing taught courses being submitted for Education Committee approval has suggested the value of a new policy framework to cover the development and consideration of any proposals in this category. This framework is intended to complement those recently introduced for Part-time Study[1] and Continuing Education[2] respectively. It is also intended to ensure that a new award programme delivered by distance learning is compatible with the collegiate University's strategic priorities and in broad terms comparable with its full-time and part-time provision. In particular, it emphasises the need for an Oxford distance learning award both to reflect best practice in distance learning and to incorporate effective quality assurance.

The policy framework does not cover other forms of distance learning which are being considered elsewhere[3] but recognises the importance of the changed context which the spread of distance learning (especially via MOOCs) is bringing about. The framework emphasises the factors to which Education Committee attaches particular significance by making their consideration a formal requirement of the approval process for all distance learning award-bearing PGT courses. This would be in addition to the requirements already set out in Education Committee's *Policy and Guidance on new courses*.[4]

1. The University's policy framework

1.1. The University recognises the potential offered by the availability of PGT part-time study delivered largely by means of distance learning. It does not envisage a major expansion of such provision, but is prepared to consider proposals for such courses where there is an exceptional need best met in this manner.

1.2. The University accepts that distance learning award-bearing courses carry particular reputational risks and therefore demand the highest standards of course design, delivery and administration.

1.3. Award-bearing distance learning courses delivered in the name of the University of Oxford must offer a quality of provision ***comparable*** to that made for other students studying on a part-time basis. This will be reflected in the range and rigour of the applicable quality assurance requirements.

1.4. In addition to the guidance already provided by Education Committee in relation to part-time study at postgraduate level and to the introduction of new courses, the guidance provided below (sections 2 to 4) sets out the particular additional considerations identified for the consideration and approval of new PGT award-bearing courses delivered primarily by means of distance learning.

1.5. Consideration of any distance learning proposal should always involve consultation (both in the early course development stages and prior to submission to Education

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[1] http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/ptgraduateprovision/
[2] http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/continuingeducation/
[3] https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/newsprojects/projects/digitaleducationstrategy/
[4] http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pgnewcourses/

Committee) with the Department for Continuing Education as the academic unit within the collegiate University with the longest established experience of education offered primarily on the basis of distance learning.

1.6. Education Committee is particularly concerned to avoid the unplanned proliferation of distance learning technologies and programmes, and to ensure expansion is in line with overriding strategies such as that for Digital Education. Should it be necessary, the committee will review its new course approval processes to ensure that they take account of this intention.

2. Factors relating to the development of course proposals

Before developing a course proposal in detail, course proposers **must** be able to satisfy themselves and be confident in their ability to demonstrate that:

2.1. The proposed new course aligns with the strategic directions of their parent department and division and of the collegiate University. A clear indication of the division's view of the strategic fit must be provided.

2.2. The proposed cohort sizes are appropriate for ensuring or promoting high quality and extensive online interaction between students and academic staff and between students and students.

2.3. Appropriate account has been taken of the significant access issues which can be associated with award-bearing distance learning courses, for example, the consistent availability to potential students of the internet, postal services, broadband etc.

2.4. The proposed distance learning course is able to provide a teaching and learning student experience that is broadly comparable to that of a full-time student, i.e. which ensures the academic rigour, intellectual challenge and expected standard of achievement of all University awards and promotes the appropriate interaction and academic exchange with academic staff of the University, and is able to offer its students a reasonable chance of performing to a comparable level to those on equivalent or similar full-time programme.

2.5. A faculty or department is confident that those who will take teaching, technical and administrative responsibility for the course can meet the expectations of distance learning students on a consistent and long-term basis.

2.6. The parent department has an appropriate technical track record and/or contains sufficient technical expertise and facilities to ensure the effective design, development and delivery of the proposed award-bearing course.

2.7. The detailed role to be played by admitting colleges has been considered and articulated - so that colleges considering accepting students studying at a distance may be made fully aware of what would be expected of them.

If the requirement in 2.5 is not available and demonstrable then a partnership is required with a department with a clear track record in such delivery (most likely to be the Department for Continuing Education) so that the range of experience and back-up is appropriately widened and strengthened.

Education Committee would not expect to receive proposals which could not set out the ways in which the course proposers could satisfy these expectations.

3. Design and development

In developing the distance learning components of a detailed course proposal (in addition to those on which comment must be provided for all proposed new courses), course proposers **must** be able to demonstrate that:

3.1. The contributions of academic staff, instructional designers and IT expertise (who may on occasion be identical) have been drawn together in the production of materials and other learning resources.

3.2. Appropriate mechanisms have been followed to ensure the design and development of learning resources that are appropriate to the intended learners (noting the specific expertise and experience available in Continuing Education - especially through its Technology-Assisted Lifelong Learning unit).

3.3. The specific challenges represented by the rigorous and effective assessment of award-bearing distance learning courses have been identified and robust mechanisms have been put in place to address them.

3.4. Learning and communication technologies have been chosen and can be suitably maintained to ensure that distance learning students and their teachers can communicate effectively.

3.5. Operational procedures and administrative arrangements are planned which are suitably flexible for students studying part-time and at a distance, and these are also replicated in the approach and arrangements agreed with admitting colleges.

3.6. A well-organised student support system is planned with processes that guarantee that interactions with students (including formative and assignment feedback and query response) are recorded, appropriate and timely.

3.7. The student support system takes appropriate account of the pressures on completion rates for distance learning students and has in place effective means of monitoring and providing appropriate flexibility and support.

3.8. An appropriate student representation mechanism is built into the course such that this does not depend wholly on personal interaction with tutors but draws on the established models within the collegiate University and also ensures students are made fully aware of the support offered to all students by their colleges, University student support services and the Oxford University Student Union.

3.9. Some element of Oxford-based experience can be time-tabled during the duration of the programme, and provides, both in its timing and duration, adequate and appropriate opportunities for formative learning.

4. Quality assurance issues

In considering the quality assurance mechanisms associated with the proposed new course, course proposers **must** be able to show that:

4.1. A significant proportion of the online teaching provided will be delivered by academic staff employed by the University and/or the colleges.

4.2. There will be appropriate external assessment of the course proposal (including sample teaching materials) and scrupulous use of external examiners in line with the University's expectations.

4.3. There will be periodic review of the programme by peers.

4.4. There will be opportunities for student feedback which reflects the student context, and which acknowledges the premium placed on timely and effective feedback for student learning.

4.5. There will be opportunities for feedback from all staff teaching on the programme (including adjunct faculty/part-time tutors).

4.6. There will be appropriate monitoring systems in place for all types of teaching employed.

4.7. The quality assurance mechanisms underpinning the proposed programme must be shown to address the fault lines often associated with distance learning provision, i.e.

- Lack of immediate peer support;
- Absence of interaction with an intellectual community; and
- Limited personal contact with academic staff.

4.8. There is appropriate recognition of the need to promote positive perceptions of distance learning among students, staff and employers, and exploration of the ways in which this might be achieved, noting that courses which allow busy professionals to participate in master's level learning are already seen as meeting a clearly acknowledged need.