Flexible and Distributed Learning Policy

Purpose and Scope

1. The purpose of this policy is to set out the principles and processes which apply to the development, delivery and monitoring of programmes which are to be delivered using flexible and distributed learning (FDL).
2. This policy ensures that the University is providing a high quality, consistent, learning experience for all students taking part in FDL programmes.
3. This policy applies to educational provision, leading to an award or part of an award for which credit is given and which is supported, delivered or assessed through methods which do not require the student to be physically present on the University campus. Modes may include:
   a. Online learning
   b. Distance learning
   c. Blended learning
   d. Work based learning
   e. Part time learning
   f. Accelerated and decelerated programmes
4. Components of FDL courses may also be delivered by travelling teachers (usually university staff), local support (including the university employing local persons to teach course components) and learning supported by the University remotely from the student (for example, remote communication between the tutor and the student via email, telephone or web-based conferencing).
5. ***While the University's definition of FDL is quite broad, it is important to stress that the University recognizes that many modules have mixed modes of delivery, i.e., they may include small elements of FDL. It will not always be appropriate, or desirable, to classify this provision as FDL and treat it as such for quality assurance purposes. For example, the use of the University's managed VLE (Blackboard) as a repository for course materials on a module does not itself constitute an example of an FDL module. Campus-based provision of this nature, which is largely traditional in its mode of delivery, but which utilises FDL methods such as e-learning via Blackboard, can be categorised as 'blended learning'. This provision should be considered under standard quality assurance processes.[1]***
6. This policy does not explicitly apply to Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) as these do not lead to the acquisition of credit or to an award or partial award. However, many of the principles in the policy may still be applied to the delivery of MOOCs and aspects of the policy may be helpful for those people developing or delivering MOOCs.
   The policy can be used in conjunction with additional guidance, which can be found via the following link: http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ltds/resources/fdl/
7. Programmes or modules delivered by FDL are intended as a contribution to the University's principal objective for learning and teaching which is:

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[1] Blended learning is a combination of face-to-face teaching and online and computer-based activities. Online activities can include modes such as video and audio resources, online tests and discussion boards and students would be able to access the online material whenever they needed it. Some experts in the field suggest that blended learning is instruction that has between 30 and 80 percent of its course content delivered online. Online courses would be those where at least 80 percent of content is delivered online.

'To deliver teaching and facilitate learning of the highest quality.' (Vision 2021, A World Class Civic university, p. 3)

Definition of Flexible and Distributed Learning

8. In keeping with Chapter B3 of the QAA UK Quality Code, FDL characterises approaches in teaching, learning and assessment as those which:
    a. Do not require a student's place of study to be physically located at a defined University location (where a student is seeking to attain an academic award through successful completion of his/ her programme of study).
    b. Do not assume that a student's programme of study is necessarily delivered on the University campus or by University staff who are physically present.
    c. Do not assume that a student is necessarily directly supported by University staff. However, students should have a named contact staff member with whom they can liaise from the beginning of their course.
    d. Do not assume that a student is routinely working with other students
    e. Do not necessarily require assessment of a student's course to take place on the University campus.

Principles

9. The following principles underpin the aims of the University's Flexible and Distributed Learning policy:
    a. The University has ultimate responsibility for the quality, academic standards and student experience wherever learning takes place and however it is delivered.
    b. All FDL activity must be appropriately approved, monitored and reviewed to ensure the quality of the student experience and the continued appropriateness of the FDL activity.
    c. Clear guidance on the operation of FDL activity from those who setup and facilitate it must be available to all those involved in FDL activity, including University staff and students.
    d. Appropriate quality assurance procedures must be put in place to ensure the quality of FDL programmes. All new FDL programmes must be subject to external scrutiny before approval by the University. The external adviser is asked to comment on the modes of learning, teaching and assessment and how effective they will be in helping the students to achieve the programme's intended learning outcomes.
    e. Appropriate academic and pastoral support must be put in place for students on FDL programmes. Each FDL programme is delivered in such a way as to provide students, who have been accepted for the programme, with the learning opportunities to successfully complete the award. It should include strategies for promoting autonomous learning and enabling students to take personal control of their own development.
    f. Students on such courses must be given the opportunity to engage productively with other students for the purposes of collaborative learning. Such provision may take the form of online discussion forums and other collaborative tools.
    g. The strategies for teaching by FDL, the provision of learning materials, the systems for student support, and the modes of assessment are explicitly designed to ensure that the aims and intended learning outcomes of the programme or module can be achieved by students who are learning by FDL.
    h. The available resources are sufficient to ensure that the programme/module can be delivered effectively by FDL.

Approval of FDL programmes or programmes including FDL components

10. Programmes that include a compulsory or optional credit bearing or non-credit bearing FDL component are subject to the University's normal procedures for the approval of new programmes. In addition to the criteria set out in the University's Programme Approval Policy (http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ltds/assets/documents/qsh-progapp-policy.pdf) and Module Approval Guidelines (http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ltds/assets/documents/Module_Approval_Guidance_revised_August2016.pdf), programmes and modules delivered by FDL are required to demonstrate that they fulfil all the appropriate additional criteria set out in this policy in order to be approved by the University/ Faculty in particular:
    a. That the technology proposed for delivery is appropriate and robust and that appropriate contingency plans are in place (to be assessed by NUIT).
    b. That the resources for the proposed programme are sufficient to meet the specific needs of an FDL programme. Resources include development, technology, production of materials, student support at a distance and staff training. There may also be additional costs in marketing the course.
    c. That any staff training and development required for delivering FDL provision is available.
    d. That any partner organisation involved in support and/or delivery of the programme is suitable and has appropriate experience and capacity as laid out in the Educational Partnerships Policy (http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ltds/assets/documents/qsh-educational-partnerships-pol.pdf).
    e. That mechanisms will be put in place to ensure the security and consistency of assessment and marking procedures.
    f. Whether, where appropriate, any Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements have been taken into consideration. Programme developers must explain any PSRB requirements in part 1 of the programme approval process.
11. Consultation with NUIT and the Library should take place at an early stage of the programme approval process and a close liaison with these services is recommended. Evidence from these services is likely to be an important part of the Programme Approval Committee's (PAC) consideration.
12. Proposers of programmes/module to be delivered by FDL and who require assistance with curriculum design are invited to contact LTDS at an early stage.

Existing programme incorporating a new FDL component

13. Any change to an existing programme must be considered through the University Policy on Changes to Programmes (http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ltds/assets/documents/qsh-progapp-majminchanges-policy.pdf) and considered through the University's programme approval process. The chair of the faculty PAC will make a judgement on whether the proposal should be considered through a PAC or via chair's action.

Modules which incorporate FDL

14. All new modules and amended modules are considered for approval via Boards of Studies and the relevant Faculty Dean.
15. Any assessments must be linked to the intended learning outcomes on Module Outline Forms.

Quality assurance and monitoring

16. Student-Staff committees should identify any issues relating to FDL delivery and bring these to the attention of the Board of Studies.
17. Boards of Studies should ensure that any FDL provision within their academic unit is monitored and reviewed in accordance with the principles detailed in this policy. These requirements are in addition to the normal expectations on boards of studies as detailed in the Boards of Studies terms of reference and business schedule.
18. All programmes or elements of study delivered through FDL are subject to routine monitoring and periodic review in accordance with the University's Policy and Procedures for Annual Monitoring and Review and Learning and Teaching Review.

External Examining

19. All external examiners for a programme which incorporates aspects of FDL should review FDL provision as an integral aspect of the programme and should view sample learning agreements, assessments and marking criteria.
20. Arrangements should be made, wherever possible, for external examiners to communicate with anyone involved in the teaching and assessment of FDL activity. They should also be given the opportunity to communicate with students where appropriate.

Learning and Teaching Review

21. The Learning and Teaching Review (LTR) SWOT analysis should consider FDL as an aspect of provision. The subject review panel should, wherever possible, meet with staff involved in organising FDL provision and with students who have taken or who are taking courses with FDL components.
22. The pre-LTR QA check should examine any handbooks related to FDL provision. Sample assessments and feedback should be examined as part of the QA check if the FDL component contributes to the final award.

Annual Monitoring and Review

23. Academic units should reflect on FDL provision in their AMR reports, highlighting any particular issues or concerns which have arisen and/ or examples of effective practice which may be shared more widely across the faculty or university.

Handbooks

24. Academic Units must ensure that all students and staff are provided with course handbooks, to include minimum course aims, roles and responsibilities and key contacts.
25. For FDL students, degree programme, stage or module handbooks should normally be provided in an electronic format. Where Blackboard is to be used as the delivery system, staff are encouraged to provide such information in an onscreen format as well as a downloadable document.

Student Records and Achievement

26. The University is responsible for ensuring that any FDL activity undertaken by students is appropriately reflected in relevant documentation, including transcripts, the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) and, where appropriate, the transcript.

Learner Support

27. Prospective students should receive a clear and realistic explanation of the expectations placed upon them for study of the programme or elements of study, this should include explanation of any IT requirements, such as bandwidth of Broadband connection required, headphones, webcam, etc.
28. Staff are expected to provide students with the following:
    a. A schedule for any learner support available to them through timetabled activities, for example, tutorial sessions or web-based conferences.
    b. Clear and up-to-date information about the learning support available to them locally or remotely for their programme or elements of study.
    c. Documents that set out their own responsibilities as learners, and the commitments of the University and School for the support of a programme or element of study.
29. Students should have:
    a. From the outset of their study, an identified contact, either local or remote through email, telephone, fax or post (in the form of a personal tutor or the module leader) who can give them constructive feedback on academic performance and authoritative guidance on their academic progression.
    b. Where appropriate, regular opportunities for discussions with other students taking the same programme/module about that programme/module, both to facilitate collaborative learning and to provide a basis for facilitating their participation in the quality assurance of the programme (this may take the form of discussion boards through the VLE).
    c. Appropriate opportunities to give formal feedback on their experience of FDL activity and the programme. This may include module and/or stage evaluations. Boards of Studies should review student feedback, with all discussion outcomes fed back to the student body.
30. Schools should ensure that students can be confident that:
    a. Staff who provide support to learners on these programmes have appropriate skills, and receive appropriate training and development.
    b. Support for learners, whether delivered by Newcastle University staff or by the staff of a support provider, or through web-based or other distribution channels, meets the expectations of the University for the quality of learner support for a programme of study leading to one of its awards.

Induction and Supervision

31. All students must receive an appropriate induction to the online element of the course before they commence FDL activity.

Student Engagement with the Programme

32. The physical attendance requirements of the University's Student Attendance Monitoring policy are not relevant when a student is engaged in flexible or distance learning and based away from the University. Arrangements allow for the possibility of students being engaged with their study despite being away from the University. In such circumstances, during these periods, the student's engagement with the programme and progress must be recorded through other means such as email contact, VLE, telephone, e-Portfolio, submitted work, Skype or other appropriate means.
33. International students on FDL programmes must adhere strictly to the compliance requirements of their study visa, in line with Home Office regulations. In the case of students with a Tier 4 visa, recorded and monitored physical attendance and engagement is normally

essential, which may preclude participation in a FDL programme. Students with other types of visas must adhere to the relevant requirements. The University has certain duties in relation to international students under Home Office legislation. It is therefore important the relevant checks are in place to ensure that students enrolling on a programme of study that includes FDL are entitled to engage in that form of study or that the relevant monitoring is in place.

34. The academic unit is responsible for making available and maintaining records of contact points between students and staff.

Students Support Recommendations

35. The Academic Unit has responsibility for ensuring that any Student Support Recommendation (SSR) from Student Wellbeing had been reviewed and that any necessary adjustments are put in place to enable the student to succeed on the FDL programme.

Learning and Teaching

Student Learning Agreement

36. A student learning agreement must be drawn up in collaboration with staff members, clearly stating the expectations of the FDL programme and the learning outcomes which the student will achieve by completing it. A student learning agreement has been found to be an effective approach to support students' participation and progress on their courses.

Assessment and Feedback

37. The University has a separate document detailing principles and policies for off-campus assessment that can be found via the following link: http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ltds/assets/documents/qsh-assmt-offcampus-policy.pdf.
38. Academic units should demonstrate that:
    a. All summative assignments completed for FDL modules and courses are secure and conform to all University policies on the submission of work and return of feedback.
    b. Any member of staff involved in the marking process has been appropriately trained on Newcastle University marking procedures.
39. Students should have access to:
    a. Information on the ways in which their achievements will be judged, and the relative weighting of units, modules or elements of the programme in respect of assessment overall
    b. Timely formative assessment on their academic performance to provide a basis for individual constructive feedback and guidance, and to illustrate the University's expectations for summative assessment.
40. The Learning and Teaching Development Service can be consulted on appropriate assessment design and secure assessment methods, including Blackboard exams and the use of Personal Capture. The University also offers a range of assessment tools to help create, set and mark assignments online. Assessment design needs to be considered in line with the principles for off-campus assessment and the University should ensure that students can be confident that:
    a. Their assessed work is properly attributed to them, particularly in cases where the assessment is conducted through remote methods that might be vulnerable to interception or other interference

b. Those with responsibility for assessment are trained to assess whether a students' submitted work is the original work of that student only, particularly in cases where the assessment is conducted through remote methods

c. Any methods, such as web-based methods or correspondence, for the transfer of their work directly to assessors are secure and reliable and that there is a means of proving or confirming the safe receipt of their work.

d. The delivery system of the programme or element of study delivered through e-learning methods is fit for purpose, and has an appropriate availability and life expectancy.

The Virtual Learning Environment

41. The University - through NUIT - has responsibility for meeting the guidelines below for the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) system which it maintains, namely Blackboard. However, if academic units use a VLE which is not supported by NUIT then they are expected to assume responsibility for ensuring the guidelines below are met.

42. The delivery and assessment of the FDL provision will take into account the lowest level of technology available to students and it is recommended that a minimum specification is specified, however, the University has no control over external factors such as network connection and personal equipment used by the student which may affect access to the material. Students should be made aware of the IT requirements before enrolling on the programme.

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This document is primarily intended for:	Chairs of Boards of Studies Degree Programme Directors Course Representatives
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