

BRIEFING PAPER

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Treat All
Students
As
Distance
Learners
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Introduction

Distance Learning (DL) programmes present new issues for many university and college departments. There are a number of possible approaches they and their institutions can take to the development of such programmes. For example, there is a tendency to view DL programme developments as entirely new programmes, designed specifically for that purpose. However, there is often real merit in developing DL programmes from existing, successful programmes being delivered on-campus or in the classroom.

Whatever the origin of a DL development, one point is clear – that the needs of distance learning and on-campus programmes are quite different. At the same time, there are points of overlap that can be used to advantage. Obviously, a DL programme derived from an existing on-campus programme should share a programme description, a course syllabus, learning objectives and possibly assessment strategies. However there is also a potential benefit for the on-campus course offered by the distance version: all materials developed to support the DL version are equally applicable to (and can be shared by) the on-campus programme.

Developing a distance learning programme

Developing a DL programme and its materials can be a significant effort and can be relatively costly; so it is important to get it right. This effort is akin to product development in industry and commerce, and should be preceded by a product design phase which helps to ensure that the product meets all user requirements. Good DL programmes therefore tend to:

- be precise in their objectives;
- look fresh in an academic sense;
- be directed and fit for purpose;
- exude a quality of build that exceeds current on-campus programmes.

This latter point does not reflect a negative view of on-campus programmes. Rather, it is a reflection of the advantages of being able to take time, stand back, and produce a design that meets all the objectives that are intended for a programme.

It is perhaps worth pausing at this point to take a look at an existing on-campus programme in your institution.

- Does the programme descriptor (and do all the module descriptors) actually reflect the current offering and the original requirements?
- Look at the overall sets of learning materials: is there a consistency to them; would they meet any quality standards used within your institution; is their coverage of their courses comprehensive; and are they easily usable, particularly in exceptional circumstances such as when a temporary lecturer has to stand in for a colleague?

- Are the materials designed to ensure that the quality of a course is continually improved, or does the quality (and possibly the direction) of a course alter and perhaps suffer each time a new member of staff is put in charge of it?

When the advantages that can be derived from a well-designed and produced DL programme are seen in their full light, it is natural to ask, "If there are such obvious advantages, why don't we do that for all our students?" There are usually resource reasons why this is impossible for all existing programmes, but it does provide an incentive to take a fresh look at any programme that is being adapted for DL. This approach can also help to set a higher quality standard for an institution to aspire to for all its courses.

The disciplined approach required for the development of DL programmes is equally valuable for all learning modes, and institutions that recognise this are able to improve the quality of **all** their programmes and save money at the same time. Not surprisingly, academic teams also obtain major benefits – greater confidence in the quality of their teaching, less time wasted on producing ad-hoc materials with a short life span and more time and money to pursue important academic interests.

Students

The students benefit too. Programmes and courses are more coherent as objectives and outcomes are clearer. Materials are of higher quality and greater relevance - they are consistent and comprehensive, and they are better integrated for tutor-led as well as self-study. In fact, this represents a step towards a significantly improved learning environment for all students, enhancing flexibility for all and helping to remove disadvantages for some. The result is a better overall learning experience for today's students.

Such developments require effort but, once in place, they can also be of great benefit to the academic staff - particularly by freeing them from some of the less valuable contact time they have with students and allowing them to concentrate on high-value contact. All students benefit from such changes.

The institution

Finally, there is potential benefit for the institution. The quality of the learning experience for the student can be enhanced, improving the reputation of the institution.

Distance learning developments also represent diversification opportunities for the institution that can help to exploit new sources of income and extend its reach – possibly on an international scale.

Other benefits of the distance learning approach

Conclusion

So, should an institution “treat all its students as distance learners”?

If we look objectively at the wider benefits of the DL approach, then there are good arguments for this statement - based on well designed courses, comprehensive banks of high quality teaching materials (which represent a significant asset for an institution), better teaching options plus use of staff time and the overall learning experience for the student.

Is this claim backed up by example? We only have to look at the courses produced by the [Open University](#) in the UK to see the process in action. Their courses are clear in the descriptions and objectives and designed to integrate into relevant programmes. Their materials are the envy of many institutions that use their books.

Evidence also comes from successful DL programmes offered by other universities. They are a success because the market likes their designs, their materials are of high quality, they are comprehensive, fit for purpose and their relevance is high. The market is never wrong!

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