BLANTYRE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

BIU - OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING POLICY

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

This Policy covers educational provision leading to an award or part of an award which is delivered, supported and/or assessed through means which generally do not require the student to attend particular classes or events at scheduled times.

The Policy outlines the minimum requirements that the University expects to be met by staff and students in the delivery of distance education. The requirements of this Policy should be read in conjunction with all other relevant University regulations, policies and guidelines, such as examinations rules and regulations.

This Policy, informed by good practice, is designed to safeguard and enhance the student experience.

DEFINITIONS

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) takes place when the lecturer and student, or supervisor and research student are in physically separate locations. Access to the lecturer or supervisor and other learners is usually enabled through the use of technology. The interaction between the student and teacher or supervisor may be synchronous (in real time) or asynchronous (with a time delay) or a mixture of both. Distance learning may also be paper-based, in which case the interaction will be asynchronous.

Flexible and blended learning (FBL) combines aspects of Distance Learning and synchronous educational practices and may involve a student spending a significant period of their studies away from the University undertaking a project, fieldwork or research either independently or under the auspices of another approved organisation, which may be based elsewhere in the Malawi or abroad.

ODL is the term used throughout this Policy. It is assumed that it may incorporate FBL, to a greater or lesser extent.

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ENHANCEMENT OF ODL PROGRAMMES AND PROVISION

General principle

Guiding the quality assurance and enhancement requirements of ODL programmes is the general principle that students studying part, or all, of their programme by ODL have an experience which is comparable with other campus-based full time students, supported by a shared understanding of the expectations and responsibilities of all parties involved.

Approval of ODL provision\

A taught programme or module, delivered by ODL, is expected to be of equal quality to any other programme or module leading to a University award and, as part of the validation process, it must demonstrate that it shall meet students' needs effectively.

Programmes and modules, which are delivered by ODL, are validated in the same way as any other programme or module. In addition, the following key questions shall need consideration by the programme team and supported by adequate documentation:

    a)   the management of the learning experience;
    b)   relevance, life expectancy, security and reliability of the learning platform and software applications;
    c)   staff skills and training;
    d)   student support arrangements; and
    e)   contingency plans in case of technological failure or inability to access the online platforms, due to any reasons which the student is based (to be discussed with appropriate University staff)

Student engagement and Annual Monitoring

All ODL shall be subject to the University's Annual Monitoring and Module and/or Programmatic Evaluation processes. Programmatic/Module evaluations shall include specific questions about students' experiences of working remotely using technology and the results discussed with appropriate staff in the University with a view to enhancing provision. DL programmes shall normally conduct Programme Committee Meetings electronically.

Where an issue arises relating to the ODL arrangements, this should be brought to the attention of staff and students concerned immediately and attempts to resolve the problem should be put in place at the earliest opportunity. If the issue cannot be resolved and the University deems that the student is unable to proceed with their studies as a result of this, the student(s) may be required to withdraw or transfer to another mode of delivery and/or programme.

Expectations on the University, its staff, and its students

Learning is a partnership between staff across the University and individual students. There is a shared set of expectations between staff and students, which the University has encapsulated in the Student Charter. Specifically in relation to DL:

Programmes shall ensure that students are provided with:

    a)   a delivery system of the programme or module that is secure, reliable, fit for its purpose, and has an appropriate availability and life expectancy;
    b)   study materials that meet the expectations of the University in respect of the quality of teaching and learning-support material for a programme or module leading to one of its awards;
    c)   an appropriate contingency plan, which would come into operation in the event of failure of the designed mode of delivery;
    d)   from the outset of the student's study, at least one identified contact, either local or remote through email, telephone and post, who can give constructive feedback on academic performance;
    e)   information about when and how they may contact staff, a clear schedule for the delivery of their study materials and for assessment of their work;
    f)   a clear and realistic explanation of the expectations placed upon them for study of the programme or module, and for the nature and extent of autonomous, collaborative and supported aspects of learning plus details of the minimum technical requirements for the computer facilities required to access the online facilities;

g) information about the Library Services, detailed on the University's Intranet > Information bank >Library resources pages;

h) where appropriate, regular opportunities for inter-learner discussions about the programme, both to facilitate collaborative learning and to provide a basis for facilitating their participation in the quality assurance and enhancement of the programme;

i) appropriate opportunities to give formal feedback on their experience of the programme;

j) access to all academic regulations and policies, including the Distance Learning Policy.

The University shall ensure that:

k) staff who provide support to learners on their programmes have appropriate skills, and opportunities to receive appropriate training and development;

l) the Programme Handbook (for taught programmes) or PGR Students' Handbook and PGR Supervisors' Handbook (for postgraduate research programmes) details how the learner support that would normally be provided on site shall be delivered off-site (eg Student Services, personal tutor and library resources);

m) support for learners, when normally provided by Student Services, is made available remotely wherever possible and practicable;

n) staff with responsibility for assessment are capable of confirming that a student's assessed work is the original work of that student only, particularly in cases where the assessment is conducted through remote methods.

Information Technology Services,* who have responsibility for software for which it holds the licenses, shall ensure that:

a) the reliability of the delivery system within its remit is tested, and that contingency plans would come into operation in the event of the system/network failing;

b) they provide support as a minimum within normal working hours (currently Monday-Friday, 9- 5).

Where the Academic Resources Form has confirmed that the delivery system will not be supported by ITS, the Programme shall be required to assume responsibility for the above.

Students shall ensure that:

a) they have regular and reliable access to the internet with appropriate firewall protection and a computer that meets the minimum technical requirements set by the programme;

b) they make their own arrangements for IT support to resolve technical failures relating to their Internet Service Provider, firewall protection and their computer hardware and software as the University can only answer queries or provide support for University-owned equipment;

c) they ensure that they understand the basic terms and descriptions used in computing so that they can follow instructions about how to use their computer to study and communicate;

d) they engage with the learning materials and mode of delivery;

e) they conform to the schedule for the programme delivery and assessment, monitor the receipt of materials and alert the University if materials are corrupted or fail to arrive;

f) they take responsibility for developing their IT skills, where appropriate;

g) they regularly check their Unimail accounts to which essential information may be sent by the   University.

Postgraduate research (PGR) students only shall ensure that they are able to attend the University in person for:
    a) Induction
    b) MPhil to PhD Upgrade Viva orTransition to Thesis Viva for Professional Doctorate students
    c) Viva Voce at the end of their research study.

Failure to attend specific learning and/or assessments deemed as mandatory may result in failure and students may be required to withdraw from the programme.

ADMISSION, ENROLMENT AND INDUCTION

Admission requirements

To qualify for consideration for admission to a ODL programme or module, applicants shall meet the normal entry requirements of the programme.

 In addition some programmes may require that applicants:
    a) have reliable access to the appropriate technology to enable them to engage with the ODL material;
    b) accept the supervisory arrangements required by the University, which may include having a local supervisor/academic adviser when studying away from University;
    c) provide evidence of access to the appropriate library, computing and other academic facilities required, e.g., letters from relevant libraries;
    d) provide evidence that they have sufficient funds available to meet the costs of the programme including travel to and from the UK and accommodation costs for attendance at the University relating to, where required, interview, induction, learning, assessment, viva voce examinations,

Where additional requirements for admission are operated by a programme, this must be clearly defined in public-facing literature about the programme.

Programmes requiring the student to spend a period of their studies away from the University undertaking a project, fieldwork or research either independently or under the auspices of another approved organisation (which may be based elsewhere in Malawi or abroad) may also require that applicants   provide evidence that they have sufficient funds available to meet the costs of the programme including, where required, travel to and from the second place of study and any associated accommodation costs.

Applicants shall submit an application in the standard way for the programme.

Where an interview is required for entry, the University may require the applicant to come to Michiru Campus in Blantyre, with video-conferencing/Skype being the preferred option for those who cannot attend a physical interview.

Where additional computer hardware and/software is required, a formal offer of a place may not be issued until University is satisfied that the appropriate equipment is in place.

The University shall ensure that all offer letters shall include or be accompanied by supplementary information confirming requirements regarding attendance, fees, induction and any special arrangements pertaining to the programme (eg research skills assessment for Postgraduate Research Programmes). Applicants should ensure that they have fully understood the terms and conditions prior to accepting an offer. The offer letter shall direct students to 'IT Skills required for Distance Learning' (Appendix 2).

PGR students only:

Most PGR students are likely to be studying at a distance from the University for some part of their registration period, whether or not they are formally registered as a Distance Learning Student. Supervision sessions can be conducted using email, skype and other forms of technology.

At interview the following matters concerning the student's learning environment will be assessed:
- a) Students must have regular and reliable access to the internet and a computer that meets any technical requirements of their project;
- b) Students must make their own arrangements for IT support;
- c) Students must make their own arrangements for library access and data gathering.

Enrolment

Enrolment and re-enrolment shall be conducted by post and/or online for Distance Learning programmes, as required by the Academic Registrar. Registry shall provide bespoke letters for DL students.

Induction

Induction may be conducted online or students may be required to attend a formal induction at Michiru Campus. ODL students are guided to online resources that induct students into distance learning. These resources are provided by the University.

PGR students (with the exception of Professional Doctorate students whose induction may be conveyed online)must attend an Induction at the University.