



Guidance note on accreditation of distance learning programmes

1. Introduction

After the publication of UK-SPEC in 2004, the Engineering Council's Registration Standards Committee (RSC) re-stated its position:

UK-SPEC does not limit accreditation to any particular mode of delivery; distance learning programmes are not excluded.

Whilst the number of accredited distance learning engineering degrees is limited, it is likely to increase. If accreditation is to continue to be useful and valued, it is important that accreditation practice embraces such developments in HE provision.

Engineering Accreditation Board (EAB) members have indicated that they would welcome guidance on this matter.

This guidance note is endorsed by the Engineering Council's RSC. It will be reviewed periodically and comments are welcome.

2. Aim and scope of this guidance note

This guidance note is intended primarily for Licensed Members carrying out accreditation of distance learning programmes, including bachelor and masters level programmes as well as foundation degrees.

Licensed Members may also wish to use this as a basis for their own guidance to academic institutions and to accrediting panels.

Documents referred to when preparing this note are listed at the end as they may further assist Licensed Members.

3. 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 and particular locations.

A wide range of programmes may be offered as distance learning, from whole degrees to individual modules. As well as for students who are remote and off campus, it can be a supplementary activity for campus-based students.

4. Key principles

Accreditation by the Engineering Council's Licensed Members has become established and valued, and it commands respect both in the UK and internationally. The same accreditation aims and standards apply to distance learning programmes as for any other type of programme, and are set out in UK-SPEC and the Engineering Council's supplementary guidance.

The effectiveness of any quality systems purpose built for distance learning should be assessed.

Assessment of distance learning assignments must be at the same level as any equivalent programme being delivered by the academic institution.

Licensed Members should notify the academic institution as early as possible about any requirements for information, evidence or visit arrangements that are additional or different to those normally required for campus-based provision.

Licensed Members must ensure that their accreditors are properly trained to carry out accreditation of distance learning with a positive approach and without prejudice. The primacy of achieving the learning outcomes should be stressed. Accreditors will be reviewing different types of material than for a taught course but these are no less valid.

Licensed Members should ensure that accrediting panels pay particular attention to the issues below.

5. 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

Licensed Members should take account of these and any other aspects of distance learning provision when carrying out accreditation.

5.1 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.

However, 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. RSC has confirmed that institutions may specify that distance learning students must graduate

within a prescribed period, which may be the same or less than that prescribed by the provider.

Academic institutions should be required to specify in their accreditation submission document the maximum length of time permitted for completion of their distance learning programme(s).

As a guide, a completion period of 6-8 years is suggested. If the provider's proposed time period is not acceptable to a Licensed Member, special notes would have to be added to the accreditation database. Where possible, the aim should be to reach an agreement.

5.2 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 equitable access to student, academic and administrative services, and timely feedback on assignments.

Greater emphasis may need to 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.

Accreditors should seek evidence that the views of distance learning students are included in student feedback and that questions about distance learning are included. These may cover, for example, the quality of web-based learning systems and access to the library.

The accreditors must meet with some distance learning students during the accreditation visit.

5.3 Project work and access to laboratories

UK-SPEC is not prescriptive about the mode of delivery. However some learning outcomes are most appropriately demonstrated by way of laboratory work.

Accrediting institutions should be prepared to consider a range of ways by which this may be demonstrated, that need not necessarily be limited to campus laboratories. For example, workbased distance learning students may be able to achieve the required standards through workplace activity.

There may need to be 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.

Accreditors will need to assure themselves that the same rigour and standards apply to the assessment of workbased laboratory work as would apply to full-time campus provision.

Similar considerations apply to project work.

Licensed Members should make explicit to the academic institution before agreeing to carry out accreditation any requirement for a practical activity that would make it difficult for a distance learning degree to be accredited. An example is the RAeS' requirement for undergraduates to undertake flight testing.

5.4 The involvement of a range of delivery partners

The Engineering Council's Regulations for Registration (26) include a requirement for an accreditation visit to all partner organisations, and this applies to distance learning provision.

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.

Licensed Members should therefore pay particular attention to the procedures adopted by the awarding academic institution for approving and reviewing any delivery partner and its agents.

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. Particular care should be taken with international franchise arrangements.

5.5 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. Accreditors should be alert to levels of non-progression above those for a campus-based programme. In such cases, the academic institution should be expected to provide a more detailed breakdown, including the reasons and any mitigating actions. It is important to ascertain whether or not any enhanced level of non-progression reflects the quality of provision.

Universities are increasingly offering multiple entry points during the academic year and students may not move through distance learning programmes as a cohort. Thus accreditors should be aware that the data and evidence provided may differ from that which they are accustomed to with more homogeneous cohorts.

5.6 Individually tailored programmes

The open-ended choice of modules offered by some universities could lead some students to undertake programmes whose design and content prevent them from covering all the required learning outcomes. Whilst this is not limited to distance learning provision, it may be a greater risk in this mode.

Accreditors should seek assurance that students are being properly advised about module choice. Information about the flagging of groups of courses as providing particular pathways within an overall programme may be required.

5.7 Confirming the authenticity of students

Accreditors must assure themselves that robust systems are in place, especially where examinations are taken off campus or outside the UK.

Academic institutions might be advised to make use of recognised centres outside of the UK such as British Council offices.

Reference material

UK-SPEC <http://www.engc.org.uk/ecukdocuments/internet/document%20library/UK-SPEC.pdf>

AHEP

<http://www.engc.org.uk/ecukdocuments/internet/document%20library/AHEP%20Brochure.pdf>

Guidance note on academic accreditation

http://www.engc.org.uk/documents/Guidance_Note_on_Academic_Accreditation.pdf

BCS guidance – <http://www.bcs.org/upload/pdf/heaapp2.pdf>

Policy on accreditation of programs offered in distance mode. Engineers Australia. 2006

http://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/shadomx/apps/fms/fmsdownload.cfm?file_uuid=676FB635-908C-8576-7755-0C8C0826A0DD&siteName=ieaust

QAA Code of Practice for the assurance of academic standards and quality in higher education

Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning. 2004

Section 9: Workbased and placement learning. 2007

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp>