

ACADEMIC BOARD – MEETING 4/99 (24 JUNE 1999)

PROTOCOLS FOR APPROVAL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES

1. BACKGROUND

It is clear from the University's Strategic and Operational Plans that the University is committed to maintaining and enhancing its status as primarily a great international campus-based University. This does not necessarily preclude some distance offerings in cases where on-campus delivery is not practicable or possible, although the reputation of the University demands that such offerings be of a high standard, giving students an educational experience comparable to that offered by the campus-based courses. This is the dilemma. The University is not a major distance education provider and therefore very reasonably will not put huge resources into a highly-developed distance education infrastructure. However, the delivery of distance offerings must be of a quality that reflects well on the University and enhances its reputation.

In October 1998, Planning and Budget Committee established a working group to investigate distance education. No further distance courses were to be approved until this group had made its recommendations. In its report (March, 1999) the working group recommended the lifting of this ban "provided that the relevant committees of the Academic Board first prepare protocols for the approval and monitoring of such courses" with special attention to be paid to putting into place "quality assurance mechanisms to guarantee, as far as possible, the integrity of the assessment process". This paper is the response of Academic Programs Committee to this requirement.

Some of the work towards developing guidelines for distance education courses has already been done. A paper was prepared in 1997 by Agnes Dodds on *Presentation of Courses Using Alternative Modes of Delivery*. This paper worked with the Criteria for Development of New Courses, adapting them to the specifics of distance delivery. It provides an excellent basis on which to develop the required protocols, and has been used in this paper. The Criteria themselves were explicated in a further paper approved by APC in 1998. It should be noted that the Criteria for Development of New Courses are not reflected in the current Course Change Proforma. The Working Group felt that it would be useful if the Proforma were revised to incorporate the material covered by the Criteria.

In addition, work has been done in the Information Division looking at some of the issues involved in servicing distance courses. A Report on Distance and On-Line Education was prepared for the Library by Susan Bray and Dorothea Rowse in March of this year. Som Naidu of MEU has written a short paper on "Implications for Teaching and Learning via Distance Education" addressing the areas in which staff developing distance courses will need support. The Academic Programs Committee is liaising closely with the Information Division to ensure a coordinated and consistent approach to the issues surrounding distance education.

It must also be noted that a great deal of distance education is already happening within the University. There are a number of programs being delivered offshore, and a number of Faculties are already offering subjects (and, in some cases, substantial programs) online. This means that there is already in the University a wealth of experience that can be drawn on to ensure that programs are of the expected high quality, as well as to identify the particular problems that the University must confront, and, in particular, that Academic Programs Committee must take into account in its approval processes.

This paper attempts to take a broad overview of the provision of distance education by the University and to suggest what needs to be done to ensure excellent distance courses. In doing this, it has at times

moved into areas that are the province of other committees and administrative and academic units. It is the Academic Program Committee's hope that this will not be seen as transgression, but rather as an attempt to facilitate coordination of the University's activities in this important area.

2. DEFINITIONS

The PBC Working Group Report defines distance courses as those in which there is "no expectation that the student will attend the campus".

Such courses are likely to be of three kinds:

- a. "Traditional" distance mode, in which packages of materials are posted out to students;
- b. Online mode, in which the subject/course is delivered via the web; and
- c. Off-campus (including off-shore) delivery, where the subject is taught (usually in an intensive period) at an overseas or interstate site.

The three modes often merge into each other: subjects taught in traditional distance mode are often now supplemented by the use of IT through email or forums, online mode is often supplemented by print materials being sent out (particularly "reading bricks"), and intensive off-campus delivery is also often supported by other materials. However, there is almost always a clear distinction between the three according to the dominant mode of delivery. It is unlikely that many traditional distance mode proposals will come before the APC to approve, since it is quickly being superseded by online delivery. This means that for the purpose of developing protocols, the Committee needs to concentrate on online and off-campus delivery.

3. PROTOCOLS FOR APPROVAL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES AND SUBJECTS

The main issues the Academic Programs Committee needs to consider for distance courses beyond the normal matters considered for on-campus courses are in three areas:

1. Quality of program and program delivery (including matters of assessment)
2. Availability of library resources
3. Technical requirements and support.

These are the elements covered respectively for on-campus courses by the Criteria for Development of New Courses/Course Change Proforma, the library impact statement, and the IT impact statement. Modification or supplementation of each of these documents is necessary to cater specifically for distance programs.

3.1 QUALITY OF PROGRAM AND PROGRAM DELIVERY

The following discussion is structured around the APC's ten Criteria for Development of New Courses.

3.1.1 Necessity and Demand

A clear case must be made in terms of targeting a particular cohort unable or unlikely to enrol in the course if it were offered on-campus, or who would particularly benefit from distance delivery.

Arguments for distance delivery of graduate and postgraduate courses will normally carry more weight than those for undergraduate courses. In general the University is committed to an on-campus undergraduate experience. Postgraduate students with work and other commitments are more likely to require and benefit from distance teaching. However, there will be cases where online or off-campus delivery is appropriate or necessary for particular cohorts of undergraduate students and/or particular undergraduate courses, and there should be no impediment to these being considered on their merits.

3.1.2 Excellent academic standards and methods of monitoring

For online courses: Apart from all the standard questions about appropriate level of content, academic standards and monitoring, greater scrutiny will be given to the actual pedagogy and the ways in which it ensures delivery of an academically excellent course. This is covered under 4 below. Monitoring of courses at Department level can be done in the usual ways through student surveys, analysis of results, staff appraisal sessions, etc. some of which is covered under 5 below.

For off-campus courses: The major question here will be about staffing. If staff are being recruited locally to deliver the program, then there must be assurances that they are as qualified as one would expect them to be if they were teaching the course on-campus. Processes for appraisal of staff teaching off-campus must be put in place.

3.1.3 Course Objectives

There are no special requirements on these for courses in distance mode.

3.1.4 Methods of teaching and assessment

Teaching

The APC will want assurances that the student experience, although different, will be comparable in quality to that of students in on-campus mode. At one level, since APC is approving course proposals, not course materials (and indeed the materials will normally not be developed before the course is approved), the APC must take it as given that any Department or Faculty of the University putting forward a proposal will deliver the course in an excellent manner. However, questions can be asked about

(i) *the appropriateness of a particular mode of delivery;*

While the normal consideration will be given to the content of the course and its appropriateness for academic study, there should be a specific concern about whether the content is appropriate to be dealt with in the distance mode proposed. For intensive off-campus courses, does the lack of time for reflection during periods of input militate against successful student performance? For online courses, can the material be delivered in an appropriate and effective way?

(ii) *the time commitment required;*

For off-campus courses, the contact time will normally the same as for an equivalent internal subject, unless part of the course is delivered through additional distance teaching materials. For online courses, it must be clear that the materials will take the equivalent time to work through as would be required for completing a comparable internal subject, counting both in-class and out-of-class commitments. (Perhaps, as a rough guide, if one considers a full-time

student (i.e. 50 points per semester) as committing forty hours a week to their study, then a 12.5 point subject should require ten hours a week or 120 hours in a twelve-week semester, a 25 point subject should require 240 hours.)

(iii) *the level of work expected;*

As for internal subjects, this is reflected both in the content statement and in the reference list, although distance courses will need to make clear how the students will be able to access the references (see Section 4 on the Library and Provision of Resource Materials below); and

(iv) *the kind of academic support to be given to students by staff teaching the subject.*

Proposals should specify how students will be supported in their work in the subjects. What kind of interaction will there be with lecturers (email, forums, teleconferencing)? What will be the level of regular interaction students can expect? What will be the availability of academic support? What level of interaction will be demanded? Consideration needs to be given to balancing the needs of students against the need to protect lecturers from an excessive workload of one-on-one electronic interactions. Where it is intended that students will have a mentor/tutor in their locality, this should be documented, with clarification of the level of support to be expected.

Monitoring Students' Work

The question of how the progress of students in a subject will be monitored must be considered. Part of this is the question of whether they are actually doing the required work or not. Although there is a great deal of rhetoric about an advantage of online delivery being that the student can do the work in their own time as best suits them, in practice this probably too often means "in the last week or so before the assignment is due". There should be an expectation that the student will work consistently on the subject, and this should be supported by regular submission of non-assessed work (e.g. weekly contributions to a forum based on the readings). Alternatively, audit trails might be included in the program to ensure that an appropriate amount of time is being spent, and the materials are being properly covered. Regular contact with the student in the subject and the requirement of regular work makes the authentication of assessment easier too. It takes away the spectre of a student enrolling in the course and never doing anything but submitting assignments written by someone else or arranging for someone else to sit the exam.

Departments proposing online subjects should indicate how they will ensure that students are committing an appropriate amount of time to working on the subject, and are working at an appropriate academic level.

There are not the same issues surrounding off-campus delivery, but proposals for off-campus subjects, particularly when taught in intensive mode, should also indicate how the students' time commitment will be monitored. (In many cases, this will be by the requirement to attend at regular classes that require between-class work.)

Assessment

If a subject has an examination, there is no real problem (apart from the administrative one) in ensuring that the work is the student's own, since some responsible local person (clergy, police, JP) can administer the examination and vouch for the identity of the person sitting it.

When there is no examination, the integrity of the assessment can be safeguarded by several measures. In all distance education courses:

- (i) it should be stated in each subject that, if there is any doubt as to the authenticity of a submission, the student will be given an examination (possibly including an oral interview, by telephone if necessary) on the content of the subject;
- (ii) the student should be required on commencement of the subject to sign a statement (in hard copy) that they undertake that all work submitted will be their own and that they understand that plagiarism and collusion are the basis for disciplinary action. Any cases of misconduct found should be prosecuted vigorously and publicly (if anonymously).

In addition, other measures must be put in place. It is not possible to specify what these must be since they will often depend on the nature of the assessment and the nature of the subject, but in most cases, building on the monitoring of the student's work discussed above:

- (iii) the student's work submitted for assessment will be measured against their overall performance in the subject in regular non-assessed tasks, and any discrepancy in performance investigated.

Other common strategies might be:

- (iv) the regular tasks in the subject will be structured so that they provide the basis for the major assessment tasks, thus making it difficult for another person to take over and just do the graded assessment pieces;
- (v) the student will be required to keep (print out at regular intervals) working notes and rough drafts of assignments that can be called in if required.

Proposals for distance subjects must specify how it is proposed to authenticate the assessment, providing sufficient detail for Academic Programs Committee to assess the effectiveness of the measures.

3.1.5 Methods by which teaching will be evaluated

This can be done in the normal ways. However, questionnaires need to be sensitive to the nature of online teaching. In particular, the crucial item on the stem questionnaire "This subject was well-taught" needs considerable unpacking for online subjects. There needs to be at least a distinction made between whether the materials delivered were of a high standard and helped the student to learn well, and whether the support given by staff members (as outlined above) was sufficient and useful. Questions about the degree of interactivity with the materials and the level of interaction with other students might also be asked.

It would also seem appropriate for a mechanism to be developed for administering the questionnaire online.

The Teaching and Learning Quality Assurance Committee (TALQAC) is working on a version of the stem questionnaire to be used for online subjects.

3.1.6 Issues of equity, safety, etc

Any additional costs for software (or hardware) for students should be specified. If particular programs are required, it should be indicated whether students will be supplied with them, or if students will have to purchase the software themselves (see Section 5, “Technical Support” below).

3.1.7 Student Workload

The additional aspects of this specific to distance delivery are covered in 4 above.

3.1.8 Faculty Resourcing

A realistic estimate of the costs of distance teaching must be made. The Working Group had some feedback which took the opportunity to emphasise that developing online subjects is very expensive in terms both of money and of staff time, arguing that if there is a commitment in the University to online delivery, then it needs to be properly funded. This issue is far outside the terms of reference of Academic Programs Committee, but it is an issue that the University and each Faculty and Department will have to address. The question of whether the University should commit to a standard course-authoring package, which would presumably bring some economies, is a related matter.

3.1.9 Interfaculty Implications

There are no special implications under this heading for distance courses.

3.1.10 Consonance with the Goals of the University

Since the University primarily aims to build its reputation on its campus-based programs, an argument will need to be mounted as to how the course furthers the goals of the University in other ways so that the distance education mode is justified.

4. LIBRARY AND PROVISION OF RESOURCE MATERIAL

The fundamental concern of Academic Programs Committee in this area is to determine whether the distance student can complete the subject/course satisfactorily, given the mechanisms that are in place for supplying materials. In this the Committee will frequently have to accept the advice of those proposing the subject and/or the Library, e.g. if assurances are given that sufficient

supplementary materials of a suitable academic standard are openly available on the Web for students to complete the course without disadvantage, then the Committee will normally accept the assertion, unless it seems inherently implausible in which case further information would be requested.

A strong view was expressed to the committee that it was the responsibility of the Library to provide a service for distance students. The argument put was on grounds of equity: that these students pay their fees like any other and so should get access to resources just as any on-campus student does. While the Working Group acknowledges that there is some justice in this argument, it must also acknowledge that the library is simply not resourced adequately to provide a service to distance students, and to offer such a service would require a disproportionate amount of its funding and so prove damaging to all its other services.

Therefore, in this paper, it is assumed that the library will not be funded to undertake the provision of materials to distance students, and arrangements will have to be made outside the library system.

The subject/course proposal should specify how students will access the materials necessary for them to complete the subject/course satisfactorily. It could be:

For off-campus subjects/courses:

- arrangements are made with a library where the subject/course is being delivered for students to access the necessary materials;
- the Department will arrange for materials to be posted out to students;

For online subjects/courses

- the online materials are extensive enough to be self-sufficient;
- the online materials will be supplemented by readings posted out;
- the online materials will be supplemented by other resources to be accessed on the Web;
- the student will be required to have access to a good library containing relevant material (e.g. in their workplace or in a local university with reciprocal borrowing rights), and will not be permitted to enrol unless this is so;

For both off-campus and online subjects/courses

- students will be expected to buy textbooks and/or books of readings that are extensive enough to cover the work in the subject;
- the Department will arrange to send out photocopies or books requested from Department resources (e.g. a Department library), or provide funds to the University Library to send material.

In all cases there must be a consultation with an information librarian at the relevant branch library :

- to establish what online information sources would be relevant and can be accessed by distance students;
- to provide assistance in identifying alternative libraries accessible by distance students and to assist with negotiating access or borrowing privileges; and
- to document these processes as part of a revised Library impact statement.

The provision of resources is particularly an area in which management of expectations is crucial. Students must realise what they are getting to work with, and that they can have no expectation that the library or anyone else will send them out additional materials.

The Information Division is developing a revised version of the Library Impact statement for distance education courses and subjects.

5. TECHNICAL SUPPORT

One of the difficulties in developing protocols for the approval and monitoring of distance courses is that there is no clear statement in some cases of where the responsibility for supporting students lies. This is particularly so in the case of online subjects and different practices have grown up around the University to suit local conditions. There is a desperate need for clarification and/or standardisation in some of these areas, since there is probably a great deal of unnecessary duplication going on, as well as a lot of buck-passing, with the result that students fall through the cracks.

At the simplest level, the question an online student faces if they are having a problem with the technology is “Who should I ring?” Leaving aside their ISP, there are basically three possibilities

within the University: ITS at University level, the particular Faculty Computer Facility, or the Department offering the subject (either a LITE or the lecturer-in-charge). The worst thing that can happen is that they are handballed from one to the other without getting an answer. ITS has developed an initial table for students, telling them whether to contact their ISP or ITS for certain problems. This needs to be extended, although the local differences (e.g. whether the main Computer Facility is at Faculty level or at Department level, whether the Faculty or the Department maintains the server) probably means it can't be done centrally. However, some such trouble-shooting guide is necessary for students, probably on a course-by-course or even a subject-by-subject basis. Alternatively, the student needs to be given clear information on who to ring as first port-of-call to get help on initial contact in the subject/course.

Students also need to be made aware from the beginning of the technical requirements of the subject. The University each year sets out its Basic Platform Technologies specifications. A student version of this prominently available on the web should be developed. Students could be expected to have the basic level specified. Proposals for particular subjects would then only need to specify (and justify) additional software or hardware requirements needed for that subject. This information should be included in the Handbook description.

Similarly, there should be a University-wide statement of basic expectations of computer skills. Again, Departments could expect this minimum, and then specify any skills needed beyond that (and outline the mechanisms for bringing students without those skills up to speed if the skill is not a precondition or prerequisite for doing the subject or taught in the subject). Again, any such requirements should be part of the Handbook description.

All this is relevant to the question of protocols for approving subjects and courses since it determines the kind of questions that need to be asked. The clearer the framework of what can be expected of students, their equipment, and University services at various levels, the clearer and more specific and straightforward can be the approval process.

A proposal should make clear:

- that the IT infrastructure at University, Faculty and Department level is able to support the proposal (or will be by the time it is implemented);
- where the responsibility for giving students technical support will lie, and how the students will be made aware of this;
- what computer hardware and software and what computer skills it is necessary for students to have to complete the subject/course satisfactorily;
- what mechanism for obtaining feedback on IT issues in the early stages of the subject and/or course will be put in place.

The Information Division is developing

- a basic equipment and software specification for students undertaking online subjects;
- a University-wide statement of basic expectations of student computer skills; and
- a revised IT Impact statement suitable for distance courses.

6. DIFFERENCES IN APPROVAL PROCESSES BETWEEN OFF-CAMPUS AND ONLINE COURSES

There is a fundamental difference between online and off-campus courses. Online courses have a dispersed cohort who have enrolled individually and are taught in virtual space, whereas off-campus

courses are usually targeted at a specific cohort who are taught in specific premises as the Faculty or Department has arranged. This has significant implications for the approval processes.

For online courses, since there is no way that the University can monitor whether the student has the appropriate equipment or computer skills (apart from formal prerequisite qualifications) to enrol, all that the University can do is make the requirements for satisfactory technical delivery and undertaking the subject clear, and throw responsibility back onto the student for ensuring that they have the equipment and skills.

For off-campus courses, the University has control over the conditions under which the subject will be taught, and those offering a subject/course must take responsibility for ensuring that

teaching facilities are of a satisfactory standard. They will also very often be able to negotiate access to libraries or computing facilities for the students. If not, it will have to be made clear to the student what additional requirements there are.

In approving online courses, the APC will be concerned that the Faculty/Department proposing the subject or course has thought through the requirements and will make them clear to the students. In approving off-campus courses, the APC will be concerned that the Faculty/Department has negotiated satisfactory facilities for teaching and for the students to use. In both cases, of course, there will be concern about the sufficiency of the teaching materials and resources available to the students.

The implication of all this is that online subjects/courses can be approved once, whereas it is not possible to approve once and for all a “generic” off-campus course that can then be offered anywhere there is a cohort that wants it, since it will be necessary in each case to ensure that the facilities available to the students are suitable.

Currently all distance education subjects as well as courses are considered a major change and must come to APC. It is likely that in time the processes for delivering subjects online will be so well established that a new non-compulsory online subject in a course will be able to be treated as a minor change, only requiring reporting in a quarterly report. However, for the moment, APC believes that the introduction of all online subjects should continue to be considered a major change and require APC approval.

APC approval must be sought for off-campus courses each time the program is offered under a different arrangement at a different site. However, a simplified mechanism will be developed whereby a course can be approved generically for off-campus delivery conditional upon seeking approval in terms of the teaching facilities, resources and IT needs each time it is offered in a different place. Changes in non-compulsory subjects in an approved off-campus program should need only to be reported in a quarterly report.

7. OTHER ISSUES

7.1 Distance Thesis Supervision

Nothing has been said in this paper so far on the matter of distance thesis supervision, since this is the province of the Research and Higher Degrees Committee. In some ways, thesis supervision could be seen as easier than coursework online, since the one-on-one exchange between supervisor and student can be easily managed through email supplemented by telephone conversations when necessary. A residency period may make subsequent electronic exchange easier, but it could scarcely be considered essential. However, the matter of availability of resources becomes crucial with thesis students, and unless they have access to a good library, they will inevitably run into difficulties, and for this reason the residency period may well need to be retained. The Research and Higher Degrees committee

urgently needs to consider whether (or under what circumstances) a residency period is necessary, and put guidelines in place for distance thesis supervision.

7.2 Administrative Processes

There is a need to get centrally coordinated standard processes across faculties to deal with the initial enrolment of online students in courses. Course planning and accessing of results is now largely done through the web so once the student is in the course, there should be no major administrative problems. However, an efficient, straightforward procedure for enrolling distance students online still needs to be developed.

8. MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

It is worth stressing the importance of managing expectations. A campus-based student finds her/himself in a large tutorial group with limited chance of individual contact with the tutor, or finds that all the books they want from the library are not on the shelves, and they take it as more or less what life is like at University. If comparable things happen to a distance student, she/he can very easily feel disadvantaged and unsupported. What can be expected from lecturers or University services must be made very clear from the beginning of any distance course.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That any proposal for distance education courses and subjects must address satisfactorily the following matters in addition to those covered in proposals for on-campus courses:
 - (a) that there is demand for the course from a cohort of students unable or unlikely to enrol if the course were offered (only) on-campus, or who would particularly benefit from distance delivery;
 - (b) that the offering of the course is consonant with and furthers the goals of the University;
 - (c) that when staff are recruited to deliver a course off-campus, they are appropriately qualified and processes for appraisal are in place;
 - (d) that the mode of delivery is appropriate to the course content;
 - (e) that the time commitment required is comparable to that required by an on-campus subject;
 - (f) that the work required is at an appropriate undergraduate, graduate or postgraduate level;
 - (g) what mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that students will be properly supported in their studies by academic staff;
 - (h) how it will be ensured that students are committing an appropriate amount of time to working on the subject, and are working at an appropriate academic level;
 - (i) how the integrity of the assessment will be safeguarded, with sufficient detail provided to enable assessment of the effectiveness of the measures;
 - (j) how students will access the necessary resource materials to complete the subject satisfactorily;

(k) for online subjects:

- (i) that the IT infrastructure at University, Faculty and Department level will be able to support the proposal;
- (ii) where the responsibility for giving students technical support will lie, and how the students will be made aware of this; and
- (iii) what computer hardware and software and what computer skills it is necessary for students to have to complete the subject/course satisfactorily.

- 2 That it should be stated explicitly in the materials for each distance education subject that, if there is any doubt as to the authenticity of a submission, the student will be given an examination (possibly including an oral component) on the content of the subject;
- 3 That students in distance education courses be required on commencement of each subject to sign a statement (in hard copy) that they undertake that all work submitted will be their own, that they understand they may be required to take an examination in the subject if there is any doubt as to the authenticity of their assessed work, and that they understand that plagiarism and collusion are the basis for disciplinary action.
4. That the Handbook entry for distance subjects specify the mode of delivery (off-campus/online/other).
5. That the Handbook entry for online subjects specify any computer hardware or software beyond the standard specification required to complete the subject.
6. That the Handbook entry for online subjects specify any computer skills beyond the standard specification required to complete the subject.
7. That the Handbook entry for distance subjects specify what level of support can be expected from the University in terms of provision of study materials and library services.

(Note: The additional material in the Handbook entries in Recommendations 7-10 could be covered by generic statements for courses rather than being repeated in each individual subject description.)

8. That the Academic Programs Committee develop a revised statement on Academic Criteria for Course Approval and Development, amalgamating the 1997 “Presentation of Courses using Alternative Modes of Delivery”, the 1998 explanatory expansions on the Criteria, and the recommendations of this paper.
9. That the Academic Programs Committee revise the Course Change Proforma to incorporate the Academic Criteria for Course Approval and Development, and develop a new section covering the information required in Recommendation 1 (a) – (i) for distance courses.
10. That APC continue to require all online subjects to be considered a major change.
11. That APC require off-campus courses to be approved each time they are offered under a different arrangement at a different site, but that a simplified mechanism for approval be developed whereby the course is approved generically for off-campus delivery dependent on approval in terms of the teaching facilities, resources and IT needs each time it is offered in a different place.

12. That the Research and Higher Degrees Committee be requested to develop guidelines for distance thesis supervision (including consideration of the circumstances under which a residency period is necessary).
13. That a standard University-wide procedure for enrolling distance students online be developed.