Distance & E-Learning Policy

1. Introduction

1.1 In keeping with the University of Malta vision and mission, this policy draws on the belief that distance education and e-learning seeks to provide enhanced learning opportunities for students, and to optimise the performance of academics. Also this policy draws upon the contention that the quality of the teaching and learning across distance and e-learning education is to match the excellence intended with face-to-face approaches to teaching and learning at the UM.

The policy is intended to enable and guide academics with ensuring the highest quality learning in the prevalent digital era, and to secure the provision of sufficient support. All academics are therefore affected by this policy and all are encouraged to read and be familiar with this policy. The policy presents the parameters within which distance education and e-learning initiatives and programmes are to be developed and delivered by academics at the UM, and how quality standards for the delivery and assessment of distance education and e-learning are to be maintained.

It does not refer to pedagogical theories and approaches associated with distance education and e-learning. Cognisance of such are however assumed in the training/ experience expected amongst academics who adopt distance and e-learning initiatives at the UM.

This policy should be read in conjunction with other UM policies and guidelines including:

- Programme Validation and Study-Unit Approval Guidelines
- Intellectual Property (IP) Policy
- Copyright Guidelines for Staff
- OAR@UM Policies
- Plagiarism and Collusion Guidelines
- Lecture Capture Policy
- VLE Archiving Policy

1.2 There is a wide range of arrangements that can fall under distance and e-learning. Within the context of this policy, the following definitions will apply:

- *Distance learning or e-learning* - A flexible form of learning where students can study at locations remote from University. Access to learning resources, other students and the instructor is generally facilitated through digital technologies.

- *Face-to-Face Study-Unit* - A study-unit in which teaching takes place mainly in the physical classroom during standard contact hours.

- *Blended Study-Unit* - A study-unit that combines physical class-based teaching and learning activities with online teaching and learning activities.

- *Online Study-Unit* - A study-unit in which all learning activities take place online in the virtual learning environment (VLE). An online study-unit may be delivered synchronously or asynchronously.

- *Distance Learning Programme of Study* - A programme which can be delivered in a blended or online modality as described below.

- *Blended Programme of Study* - A programme which consists of a planned mix of delivery modalities, including face-to-face, blended and/or online study-units as defined above. Any programme in which less than 100% of the study-units are online is categorised as a blended programme.

- *Online Programme of Study* - A programme in which all the study-units are delivered online. An online programme may be delivered synchronously or asynchronously.

- *Synchronous Online Classes* – These classes require students and instructors to be online at the same time. Lectures, discussions and presentations occur at specific hours using web conferencing tools.

- *Asynchronous Online Classes* – These classes allow students to follow the study-unit in their own schedule. The instructors provide recorded lectures, learning resources, activities and assignments through the VLE. Students are required to access the learning resources and participate in learning activities on a regular basis.

1.3 In recent years, the use of learning technologies to supplement face-to-face study-units has increased. Academics are increasingly using the VLE to provide information and resources to students (e.g. study-unit description and schedule, lecture notes, recordings, reading lists, additional web resources, sample exam questions etc.) and to perform basic administrative functions (e.g. class announcements and assignment submission). The University recommends that all face-to-face study-units are supported through the VLE in this manner. This supplemental use of the VLE however, is not considered as distance and e-learning.

1.4 The physical separation of students from University has major implications for programme design, development and delivery. This policy is intended to help manage the potential risks posed by the challenges and the complexities in the arrangements for blended and online programmes (and study-units) and to safeguard academic standards.

2. Planning & Approval

2.1 The University is responsible for ensuring that the quality of the learning experience offered through distance learning is adequate to achieve the academic standards required for each award.

2.2 Proposals for new programmes and study-units that will be delivered in a blended or online modality should be progressed through the standard procedures set by the Programme Validation Committee (PVC). Any existing campus-based programmes and study-units where an element of online learning is proposed should also follow the normal procedures for amendments to programmes and study-units.

2.3 The validation of distance learning programmes and study-units is undertaken by PVC in consultation with the Distance & E-Learning Validation Sub-Committee.

2.4 When seeking approval for distance learning programmes or study-units, academic departments are required to address the full resource requirements for design and delivery, to ensure that full costings have been undertaken and that appropriate staff and resources are available so that the programme or study-unit runs smoothly.

2.5 *Blended Study-units*:

a. Academics planning to convert up to 25% of the contact hours of <u>an existing face-to-face study-unit</u> to an online modality, are required to follow the University procedures for 'minor amendments to study-units' and also submit the Blended Study-unit Checklist (Appendix B).

b. Academics planning to convert more than 25% of the contact hours of <u>an existing face-to-face study-unit</u> to an online modality, are required to follow the University procedures for 'major amendments to study-units' and submit the Blended Study-unit Checklist (Appendix B).

c. For each subsequent increase in the online component of an <u>existing face-to-face study-unit</u> beyond 25%, academics are required to follow the University procedures for 'major amendments to study-units' and submit the Blended Study-unit Checklist (Appendix B) with the Study-unit Approval Form (Appendix A).

d. Academics planning to introduce a <u>new study-unit</u> that will be delivered in a blended modality, are required to complete and submit the Blended Study-unit Checklist (Appendix B) with the Study-unit Approval Form (Appendix A).

2.6 *Online Study-units*:

a. The conversion of an existing face-to-face study-unit or a blended study-unit to a fully online study-unit must follow the University procedures for 'major amendments to study-units'. Academics are required to submit the Online Study-unit Checklist (Appendix C) and the Study-unit Approval Form (Appendix A).

b. Academics planning to introduce a new online study-unit, are required to complete and submit the Online Study-unit Checklist (Appendix C) with the Study-unit Approval Form (Appendix A).

2.7 *Distance Learning Programmes:* Programme originators are required to submit the Distance Learning Programme Checklist (Appendix D) with the Stage 1 Proposal Form (Appendix A).

2.8 Continuing approval of distance learning programmes and study-units is conditional upon a satisfactory review of the programme or the study-unit. All distance learning programmes and study-units will be reviewed immediately after the first delivery cycle. The review process includes a student evaluation of the programme and study-units. Subsequent reviews of distance learning programmes and study-units will follow the University programme review procedures for campus-based programmes.

3. Staff Expertise

3.1 Academics involved in distance learning programmes must have appropriate skills in the design and delivery of blended/online study-units or receive appropriate training and development to support effective practice in online distance delivery.

3.2 The University shall organise technical and pedagogical training in online teaching and shall also support such endeavours.

3.3 It is strongly recommended that academics gain blended teaching experience before delivering fully online study-units. This approach enables academics to gain a better understanding of the challenges of online teaching. Initial attempts at blended teaching should involve the conversion of not more than 25% of a face-to-face study-unit to online modality.

4. Learning Technologies

4.1 The technologies used in distance learning programmes must be fit for purpose, secure and reliable. Distance learning programmes and study-units are required to be delivered through the UM VLE. In addition to the UM VLE, the University supports other learning technologies which can be used for distance learning. If technologies other than those supported by the University are going to be used, there must be clear contingency plans in the event of failure of these technologies.

5. Student Information & Support

5.1 All students should receive clear, consistent and sufficiently detailed programme documentation but this is particularly critical for distance learning students who cannot easily approach staff in person for clarifications.

5.2 Prospective students should receive clear explanations about the requirements of the distance learning programme including:

a. The admission requirements of the programme, particularly where these include access to resources, hardware/software, Internet subscription, relevant digital competencies etc.

b. The expectations, including time commitment, that would be placed upon them as distance learning students.

c. The nature and extent of independent, collaborative and supported study entailed by the programme.

d. Any attendance requirements for on-campus study or fieldtrips at any time throughout the programme.

5.3 Students should be provided with a comprehensive student handbook which includes programme aims and learning outcomes, a clear schedule of the programme, full study-unit descriptions, assessment methods and information about learning resources and learning support. The handbook will be compiled by the course co-ordinator in consultation with the Registrar.

5.4 The student handbook should also provide information about the availability of academic, technical and pastoral support, including on-line support and opportunities for face-to-face meetings, and the anticipated response times to requests for information or help. Students should be made aware of what support is available to them, in terms of for example of academic advice, library and IT support. Students must be made aware of the University's complaints, disciplinary and appeals procedures as these apply to them.

5.5 Students enrolled on distance learning programmes should receive adequate induction and training. This should include training in the use of technologies used during the programme.

5.6 Students should have an identified contact (local or remote) together with clear arrangements for contact (via email or telephone) to provide constructive feedback on academic performance and authoritative guidance on their academic progression.

5.7 Where possible and appropriate, collaborative learning opportunities should be nurtured and promoted as they offer a strong dimension of student support. The planning of such peer discussion activities into the programme of study would be determined by the nature of the programme and its intended aims and outcomes.

6. Assessment

6.1 The methods of assessment used for any programme or study-unit will vary depending upon the nature of learning to be assessed. In the case of distance learning programmes, the range of assessment methods may be restricted if the students are not required to visit campus. The academic standards adopted for assessments in distance learning programmes must be at par with assessments in campus-based programmes.

6.2 Students should have opportunities for structured and timely formative assessment, and receive constructive and timely feedback, in relation to learning outcomes and academic progress through the programme.

6.3 Students should be provided with clear information on the arrangements for formal assessment. Such arrangements must be secure and reliable and take account of time zones, location of examination centres, supervision and security of assessments, and submission of assessments as appropriate.

6.4 There must be robust systems in place to permit students to confirm that their assessed work has been received safely and within the deadline.

6.5 Security issues relating to the authentication of a student's work should be considered when designing assessment processes. Measures to reduce such issues may include assessments integrated in learning activity, multiple assessments per study-unit, peer assessment, group assessments, regular online discussions, and use of assessments that relate to the student's own practice.

6.6 Students should be made aware of the University's guidance on avoiding plagiarism. There must be arrangements in place to identify and deal effectively with fraud, plagiarism and impersonation in order to ensure that students' assessed work can be properly attributed to them.

6.7 If there is a requirement for students to sit an invigilated examination overseas, the standard University procedures should be followed.

7. Appendices

- Appendix A - Study-Unit Approval Form & Stage 1 Proposal Form
- Appendix B - Blended Study-Unit Checklist
- Appendix C - Online Study-Unit Checklist
- Appendix D – Distance Learning Programme Checklist

APPENDIX A

Study-unit Approval Form & Stage 1 Proposal Form

- Study-unit Approval Form is available from the Academic Programmes Quality and Resources Unit website.

- Stage 1 Proposal Form for new programmes of study is available from the Academic Programmes Quality and Resources Unit website.

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Blended **Study-Unit Checklist**

INSTRUCTIONS

Reference should be made to the 'Distance & E-Learning Policy' when completing this form.

This form should be completed by academics planning to:

a. convert up to 25% of the contact hours of <u>an existing face-to-face study-unit</u> to an online modality. There is a requirement to follow the University procedures for 'minor amendments to study-units' and submit this form to APQRU.

b. convert more than 25% of the contact hours of <u>an existing face-to-face study-unit</u> to an online modality. There is a requirement to follow the University procedures for 'major amendments to study-units' and submit this form to APQRU.

c. make subsequent increases in the online component of an <u>existing face-to-face study-unit</u> beyond 25% of the study-unit. There is a requirement to follow the University procedures for 'major amendments to study-units' and submit this form to APQRU along with the [Study-unit Approval Form](#).

d. introduce a <u>new study-unit</u> that will be delivered in a blended modality. This form must be submitted to APQRU along with the [Study-unit Approval Form](#).

This checklist is intended:

▪ to provide academics with a series of prompts and areas to consider when planning the development of a blended study-unit.

▪ to provide the Programme Validation Committee and Distance & E-Learning Committee (DEC) with details of areas to explore when considering proposals for blended study-units.

Academics are encouraged to refer to DEC when filling this form.

1. **Identify the study-unit, its ECTS value and the hours of online delivery.**
2. **Indicate an estimate number of students that will be enrolled on the study-unit.**
3. **Identify the topics/modules in the study-unit that will be delivered online.**

APPENDIX B

4. **What are the benefits of delivering the identified topics/modules online rather than in-class (F2F)?**
5. **Provide an overview of how the identified topics/modules will be delivered and supported.**
6. **Indicate how the learning outcomes covered in the online topics/modules will be assessed.**
7. **Will the study-unit make use of learning technologies beyond the centrally supported technologies (by UM IT Services)?**
8. **Provide details about the online teaching and/or learning experiences of the lecturer delivering the online topics/modules.** *Has the lecturer been engaged in online teaching in the past? Has the lecturer followed any online courses in the past? Include UM VLE screen shots of existing study-unit/s delivered by the lecturer that are supported by the UM VLE.*
9. **Provide details about professional development courses/workshops that the lecturer has undertaken related to online teaching and learning. Does the lecturer require any training/support in the design and delivery of online learning?**
10. **Provide details of additional lecturers and/or support staff engaged for F2F and blended components.**

APPENDIX C

 L-Università ta' Malta   **Online   Study-Unit Checklist**

INSTRUCTIONS

Reference should be made to the 'Distance & E-Learning Policy' when completing this form.

This form should be completed by academics planning to:

a. convert an <u>existing face-to-face study-unit or a blended study-unit</u> to a fully online study-unit. There is a requirement to follow the University procedures for 'major amendments to study-units' and submit this form to APQRU.

b. introduce a <u>new study-unit</u> that will be delivered fully online. This form must be submitted to APQRU along with the Study-unit Approval Form.

This checklist is intended:

- to provide academics with a series of prompts and areas to consider when planning the development of an online study-unit.

- to provide the Programme Validation Committee and Distance & E-Learning Committee (DEC) with details of areas to explore when considering proposals for online study-units.

Academics are encouraged to refer to DEC when filling this form.

1.   Identify the study-unit and its ECTS value.
2.   Indicate an estimate number of students that will be enrolled on the study-unit.
3.   What are the benefits of delivering the study-unit online?
4.   What model/s for online content are being proposed in the study-unit?   *Explain how the learning technologies will be utilised to deliver the learning resources within the programme. For example, will learning resources consist of readings, online video resources, recording of videos/podcasts by lecturers, notes, electronic presentations etc.*

APPENDIX C

5. **What model/s for communication and collaboration are being proposed in the study-unit?**

    Explain how the learning technologies will be utilised to support communication and collaboration during the programme.

6. **What model/s of formative and summative assessment are being proposed in the study-unit?**

    Explain how the formative and summative assessment will be carried out during the study-unit. Outline the processes that will be implemented for providing feedback to students.

7. **What digital literacies, technical skills and technology infrastructure (hardware, software, Internet connectivity) should the students have to engage fully with the study-unit?**

8. **Will the study-unit make use of learning technologies beyond the centrally supported technologies (by UM IT Services)?**

    All distance learning study-units are required to make use of the UM VLE. If the study-unit requires the use of learning technologies that are not supported by the University, provide full details of how these will be supported and how technical issues will be mitigated.

9. **Do licensing arrangements exist which will enable distance learning students to utilise all of the proposed learning technologies?**

    Ensure appropriate licenses are in place for all software, content and tools used in the study-unit.

10. **Provide details about the online teaching and/or learning experiences of the lecturer delivering the online topics/modules.**

    Has the lecturer been engaged in online teaching in the past? Has the lecturer followed any online courses in the past? Include UM VLE screen shots of existing study-unit/s delivered by the lecturer that are supported by the UM VLE.

11. **Provide details about professional development courses/workshops that the lecturer has undertaken related to online teaching and learning. Does the lecturer require any training/support in the design and delivery of online learning?**

12. **Provide details of additional lecturers and/or support staff engaged for F2F and blended components.**

APPENDIX D

 L-Università ta' Malta **Distance Learning Programme Checklist**

INSTRUCTIONS

Reference should be made to the 'Distance & E-Learning Policy' when completing this form.

This form should be submitted to APQRU along with the Stage 1 Proposal Form when proposing new distance learning programmes.

This checklist is intended:

- to provide programme originators with a series of prompts and areas to consider when planning the development of a programme of study delivered in blended or online modality.

- to provide the Programme Validation Committee and Distance & E-Learning Committee (DEC) with details of areas to explore when considering proposals for distance learning programmes.

Programme proposers are encouraged to engage with DEC as early as possible to assist in the development of the programme proposal.

1. **Is there a business case for delivering the programme of study via distance learning?**   *Provide a brief description of the market demand for the programme and proposed model of delivery. Will the demand for this programme be ongoing or for a specific period?*
2. **What are the benefits of delivering the programme via distance learning?**   *Develop a clear rationale to support the proposal.*
3. **What model/s for online content are being proposed in the programme?**   *Explain how the learning technologies will be utilised to deliver the learning resources within the programme. For example, will learning resources consist of readings, online video resources, recording of videos/podcasts by lecturers, notes, electronic presentations etc.*

APPENDIX D

4. **What model/s for communication and collaboration are being proposed in the programme?** *Explain how the learning technologies will be utilised to support communication and collaboration during the programme.*
5. **What model/s of formative and summative assessment are being proposed in the programme?** *Describe how formative and summative assessments will be designed with distance learners in mind. What measures will be put in place to authenticate students' work, particularly where the assessment is conducted through remote means? Outline the processes that will be implemented for providing feedback to students.*
6. **What digital literacies, technical skills and technology infrastructure (hardware, software, Internet connectivity) should the students have to engage fully with the programme?** *Publicise these to potential students as part of the programme marketing and recruitment processes.*
7. **Are there any issues around the programme proposal, model and student engagement processes that need to be addressed (e.g. multiple time zones, cultural issues, etc.)?** *Explain how any such issues will be addressed during the distance learning programme.*
8. **Will the programme include face-to-face elements (e.g. residential blocks, campus-based tutorials)?** *Provide brief details (when, duration, optional/compulsory etc.) about these face-to-face components.*
9. **How will student support mechanisms that are physically available to campus-based students be made available to distance learning students?** *Identify the different levels of student support which will be required – academic support, technical support, pastoral support, administrative support etc. Identify which departments will be responsible for delivering these.*

APPENDIX D

10. Are all learning technologies being proposed within the programme supported by UM?

All distance learning programmes must be delivered through the UM VLE. The University maintains a range of learning technologies to support distance learning.

If technologies other than those supported by the University are required during the distance learning programme, provide (a) details about any additional costings involved and (b) a contingency plan in the event of failure of these technologies.

11. Do licensing arrangements exist which will enable distance learning students to utilise all of the proposed learning technologies?

Ensure appropriate licenses are in place for all software, content and tools used during the programme.

12. Do all staff delivering the programme have the necessary knowledge and skills sets to design, deliver, support and assess the programme?

Determine whether all staff (resident, visiting etc.) have appropriate skills to create, deliver, support and assess the study-units within the programme. Describe how staff will be trained and supported during the programme. Produce a staff development strategy to ensure a consistent baseline of staff digital literacy. Engage with DEC as early as possible to assist with this.

13. Will additional staff resource be required to deliver this programme?

Provide details of additional lecturers and/or support staff required for this programme. Identify the person (academic & support staff) who has the required expertise to support academics involved in this programme.

14. What special course marketing, recruitment or promotional processes will be required to support effective online distance learning?

Engage with the Marketing, Communications and Alumni Office and DEC as early as possible to assist.

Approved by Senate on 14 June 2018