

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

Teaching Committee

DISTANCE LEARNING FORUM

Minutes of the meeting of the Distance Learning Forum held on 8 October 2018

Present: Jan Ball, Iain Barr, David Brown, Charlotte Chamberlain (GSA), Russ Grant, Sally Hancock, Anna Hastie, Juliet James (Secretary), Tracy Lightfoot (Associate PVC, Chair), Cecilia Lowe, Jane Lund, Enrico Reuter, Ellen Roberts, John Robinson, Emma Schroeter, Hannah Spencer, Richard Walker, Helen Weatherly

Apologies: John Blase, Charlotte Carter, Peter Corbett, Martin Forster, Noel Jackson, Janaka Jayawickrama, Jane Jones, Kelly McDonald, Mathilde Maitrot, Nicholas Page, Jane Rawlings, Jo Rose, Fiona Watson, Emma Wells

M18-19/1 Minutes of the last meeting

The Forum approved the minutes of the meeting held on 22 May 2018.

M18-19/2 Matters arising not occurring elsewhere in the agenda

(a) **Fees Office:** further to M17-18/26:

- the Forum was reminded that online and distance learning (ODL) programmes delivered in partnership with Higher Education Partners (HEP) were charged on a pay per module basis and if fees were not received, a student could not access the module. Non-HEP ODL programmes were charged on a per programme basis, and those involved noted that students often had difficulty finding lump sums to cover the fees and that the methods available for staggering the cost were not ideal, and often clunky to use. In addition, there was often a significant delay in informing departments of the non-payment of fees, enabling students to access teaching when they were not eligible. Non-HEP ODL programme teams would like easy, flexible payment options to be made available for their programmes and argued that there was clear evidence of demand for this from current and prospective students:
 - Ellen Roberts, on behalf of ODL programmes in SPSW, reported that 90% of queries from prospective students related to fee payments, with a significant proportion of these requesting flexible payment options. If the University wished to expand its existing ODL provision, it would make good business sense to ensure that the expectations of prospective students were met
 - the Chair, reporting on behalf of the MIHA ODL programme team, noted that the requirement to pay fees on a certain date could be problematic when students were often located in areas suffering natural or political disasters
 - Iain Barr, on behalf of Lifelong Learning, reported that their ODL students were not eligible for student loans and so a desire for more flexible fee payment options was common
 - Helen Weatherly, on behalf of ODL programmes in Heath Economics, noted that they charged a deposit for materials but with respect to queries from students she would investigate further and report back [*Secretary's note: subsequent to the meeting, Helen Weatherly reported that students, particularly the increasing number of self-funders would like more flexible fee payment options. Employers would also like more flexible fee payment options.*]

- Anna Hastie, on behalf of the CPD Unit, noted the importance of clear terms and conditions to clarify what happened when one party cancelled
- the Chair noted that flexible fee payment options may also be an issue for PGR students and so she would continue to raise this issue with the Fees Office alongside the Dean of the YGRS.
ACTION: Chair

- (b) **Communications:** further to M17-18/26, it was noted that the landing webpage for marketing ODL programmes needed revisiting to make it clearer and more appealing. There also needed to be an effective way of distinguishing, in marketing and student-facing communications, between those ODL programmes run in partnership with HEP and those not run in partnership. **ACTION: Chair to ensure that a revised version of the landing page for marketing ODL programmes is shared with Forum members for comment**
- (c) **Assessment of ODL students:** further to M17-18/26, the Chair noted that she would raise the issue of equity between HEP and non-HEP ODL students with respect to assessment rules with the new Chair of the Standing Committee of Assessment. **ACTION: Chair to report back at the next meeting**
- (d) **VLE update:** further to M17-18/26, it was noted that an update to the Blackboard VLE would be scheduled, staff permitting, in the week before Christmas (2 days in the week commencing 16th December 2018). An update was also scheduled for the second week in July 2019 (2 days in the week commencing 9th July 2019). **ACTION: Programme teams to contact the Programme Design and Learning Technology Team if they have any scheduled teaching or assessment activities over these periods in order to find a solution**
- (e) **New PGT prospectus:** further to M17-18/27, it was noted that the project to revamp the PGT prospectus was in progress. The project lead, Hannah Hughes, would be invited to the next meeting. **ACTION: Secretary** [*Secretary's note: subsequent to the meeting it was noted that this project had been put on hold.*]

M18-19/3 Terms of reference

The terms of reference had been updated to remove the reference to the Forum's role with respect to Wentworth College Online Community (see M17-18/31). It was noted that the membership list needed amending to include the GSA and the Head of the Learning Enhancement, and updating to reflect changes to job titles. It was agreed that it would be helpful to change the terminology associated with the Forum from 'distance learning' to 'online and distance learning'.

The Forum recommended to UTC its updated terms of reference (Appendix 1).

M18-19/4 Good practice: enhancing supervisory support (SPSW)

The Forum received a presentation (provided separately) from Jane Lund and Enrico Reuter, from the ODL programme team in SPSW, on enhancing supervisory support. The presentation was followed by discussion.

It was noted that:

- SPSW view robust supervisory support as a key element in obtaining positive feedback from students on their ODL programmes and for ensuring good rates of retention and completion from students who are not only at a distance but also often juggling significant professional and personal responsibilities and coming from varied education backgrounds
- in SPSW's ODL programmes, the role of the supervisor is to maintain an over-arching view of the student's academic progress (with a particular focus on highlighting overall strengths and

weaknesses, e.g. in academic writing), as well as signposting to pastoral support and helping the student to manage the academic consequences of any pastoral issues

- in SPSW's ODL programmes, there is a pro-active approach to supervisory support, with a timetable of contact points and clear procedures for following up students who are struggling. Efolios are used for secure record-keeping of student-supervisor interactions
- recent innovations have included asking students to reflect on their academic work at the end of year 1 and using this as a basis for a student-supervisor discussion, more pro-active support for struggling students (particularly in advance of critical assessment points), and use of the student's personal study plan to stimulate conversation. With respect to student reflection on their progress, SPSW is considering how it can increase the level of participation in this activity and the value to students, for example by embedding it more within the programme and providing a more structured approach (e.g. a pro forma to complete, with a focus on forward planning)

In discussion it was noted that;

- SPSW refer students to the Writing Centre and are grateful for the support it offers. **ACTON: Head of Learning Enhancement to look at the numbers of ODL students (from all ODL programmes) assisted by the Writing Centre and report back to the Forum**
- for students on programmes delivered in partnership with HEP, there is a different model of student supervision, with the Student Success Coordinators undertaking a triage role and signposting students to their supervisor or student support services as necessary. An analysis of how well this process is working would be undertaken in due course
- supervisory support of all kinds provides useful informal feedback on how well modules and programmes are running and it is important to ensure that there are processes in place for this feedback to be collated and shared with the relevant people
- with respect to maintaining student engagement, SPSW noted the importance of aligning learning activities with learning outcomes and assessment, providing a diversity of learning activities, and ensuring that learning activities are tutor-facilitated
- a virtual office hour for ODL student supervisors would be worth experimenting with; members would be keen to learn whether this approach worked.

The Chair thanked Enrico Reuter and Jane Lund for their time.

M18-19/5 External partnership with Higher Education Partners (HEP) to expand online and distance learning at the University

The Chair reported that (further to M17-18/30):

- with respect to the TYMS HEP programmes:
 - the first and second cohort of students on the programmes had started in June and September respectively, with a further cohort starting in late October
 - student numbers were in line with recent predictions
 - the first assessment for the first module had been submitted
 - Sinead McCotter had been appointed as Director of Online Learning in TYMS
- Computer Science are developing a suite of three Master's programmes with a view to launching in April 2019. Modules from these programmes should be available on a stand-alone basis for CPD
- HEP had appointed a new Academic Services Director, with experience of working in another ODL external provider and an interest in quality assurance and governance. He would be visiting the University shortly and was planning to undertake a review of progress so far
- following the launch of the TYMS HEP programmes, there are a number of policies and procedures that need to be re-visited e.g. a revised timeline for re-assessment and the need to facilitate employer payments

- dealing with claims for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) was proving an initial challenge for those involved with the TYMS HEP programmes and RPL was also likely to be popular with prospective students for the Computer Science HEP programmes
- changes to ODL providers within the UK (the end of one established University-external provider partnership, but the establishment of several new partnerships) presented both opportunities and challenges for York.

M18-19/6 Online and distance learning central student support

The Forum received a report (further to M17-18/26 and 31), from the Student Support Coordinator: Online and Distance Learning (SSCODL) on the central support provided for ODL students.

It was noted that:

- the embedding of the post within Student Services was working well in terms of ensuring cover and knowledge sharing
- work had been undertaken with GSA and YUSU to reduce the volume of communication to ODL students [the GSA noted that it was required to send election information to students]
- work had been undertaken to improve the web-based interface for ODL students and to enhance channels of communication to the Student Support Coordinator.

M18-19/7 Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES)

The Chair reported that the biennial PTES results were in and that ODL students could be viewed under two filters: self-reported and York-defined. The response rate had not been as high as desired but the results for ODL programmes (notably those in SPSW which provided the bulk of the respondents) had been very positive, with a higher overall satisfaction than non-ODL PGT students at York, the best retention rate in the sector and second-best result in the assessment dimension in the sector. The Chair noted that the PTES survey provided a useful baseline and she hoped that the University's position would not be lost as its ODL provision expanded. Ellen Roberts noted that she felt that students on Leave of Absence (LoA) should not be excluded from PTES. **ACTION: Secretary to flag the issue of ODL students on LoA to the PTES team for consideration**

M18-19/8 Careers' plans for improving provision for online and distance learning students

The Forum (further to M17-18/29) received a brief update about Careers' plans for improving provision for ODL students, as follows:

- the research project on careers provision for PG students, led by Janice Simpson, was still ongoing
- the online CV tutorial had been updated to make it more relevant to the needs of ODL students and would be live in November
- Careers had been working with the Mature Learners Association – although this work appeared to be focused on campus-based students.

The Chair noted that a continued focus on Careers provision for ODL students was important, particularly because employment outcomes for PG students at York appeared low in comparison to the sector. **ACTION: Kelly McDonald to provide an update at the next meeting**

M18-19/9 Continuing professional development (CPD) for those involved in online and distance learning at the University

Further to M17-18/32, it was noted that:

- Jan Ball was continuing to develop training for tutors on the HEP programmes
- it was suggested that a network of practice be set up for those involved in tutoring on ODL programmes or supervising distance learning PhDs. **ACTION: those interested to contact Richard Walker (richard.walker@york.ac.uk)**

- Forum members might be interested in CMALT (Certified Membership of the Association for Learning Technology) which maps to the UKPSF. CMALT is a portfolio-based, accreditation scheme for learning technologists. **ACTION: those interested to contact Richard Walker**
- so far there had been insufficient interest in the peer observation programme for ODL tutors to establish a new cohort. **ACTION: Chair to raise with TYMS regarding those tutoring on TYMS HEP programmes; Iain Barr to raise with Lifelong Learning ODL tutors**

M18-19/10 Massive Open Online Programmes (MOOCs)

Iain Barr reported that:

- UEB had signed a 12-month extension of the University's contract with Future Learn to deliver MOOCs. The focus would be on MOOCs to stimulate recruitment and serve as a platform for research
- he would be attending a Future Learning conference on MOOCs and widening participation and would report back on this
- the University's sixth MOOC in digital well-being would be starting soon. It had been praised by Future Learn and Forum members were asked to encourage their students to consider joining
- two existing MOOCs would be re-run this year.

M18-19/11 Writing and Language Skills Centre

Cecilia Lowe reported that the Writing Centre had become the Writing and Language Skills Centre, following the incorporation of the Centre for English Language Teaching into the Academic Support Office. In due course, the Centre hoped to develop its language skills provision (e.g. workshops) and would consider how this would be made accessible to ODLS.

M18-19/12 Remaining 2018/2019 meetings

- Monday 18 February 2019 12.30-14.30 HG17
- Monday 20 May 2019 12.30-14.30 HG17

UNIVERSITY TEACHING COMMITTEE

ONLINE AND DISTANCE LEARNING FORUM

Membership

- Chair: the PVC for Learning, Teaching and Students or their nominee, currently the Associate PVC for Learning, Teaching and Students
- The Head of Programme Design and Learning Technology (Academic Support Office) (*ex officio*)
- The Head of Learning Enhancement (Academic Support Office) (*ex officio*)
- The Academic Registrar or their nominee (*ex officio*)
- The Vice-President (Academic) and CEO of the GSA (*ex officio*)
- Student Support Coordinator: Online and Distance Learning (*ex officio*)
- Staff involved in developing, running, or supporting online and distance learning programmes (or programmes involving a significant element of online and distance learning) within departments (at least two named representatives (at least one academic) per programme/programme family)
- Staff involved in the central support of online and distance learning programmes (including a named representative from the Planning Office, Information Services, Careers, Student Recruitment and Admissions, Student Services, and Marketing)
- Secretary: Academic Support Office

Terms of Reference

1. To act as a forum for those involved in developing, running and supporting online and distance learning programmes (or programmes involving a significant element of online and distance learning) including those developed with external partners, facilitating the exchange of information and the discussion of issues of common interest and concern
2. To identify good practice in online and distance learning and disseminate it within the University
3. To serve as a source of advice on online and distance learning within the University (e.g. advising on new online and distance learning programmes and acting as panel members on online and distance learning reviews)
4. To consider the pedagogic and practical needs of online and distance learning programmes (e.g. in relation to policies on programme design, assessment regulations, student support, finance, student records, staffing, marketing and communications etc.), seeking information from, and referring actions to, relevant committees and offices within the University
5. To report to University Teaching Committee.

(Agendas and minutes: Academic Support Office)