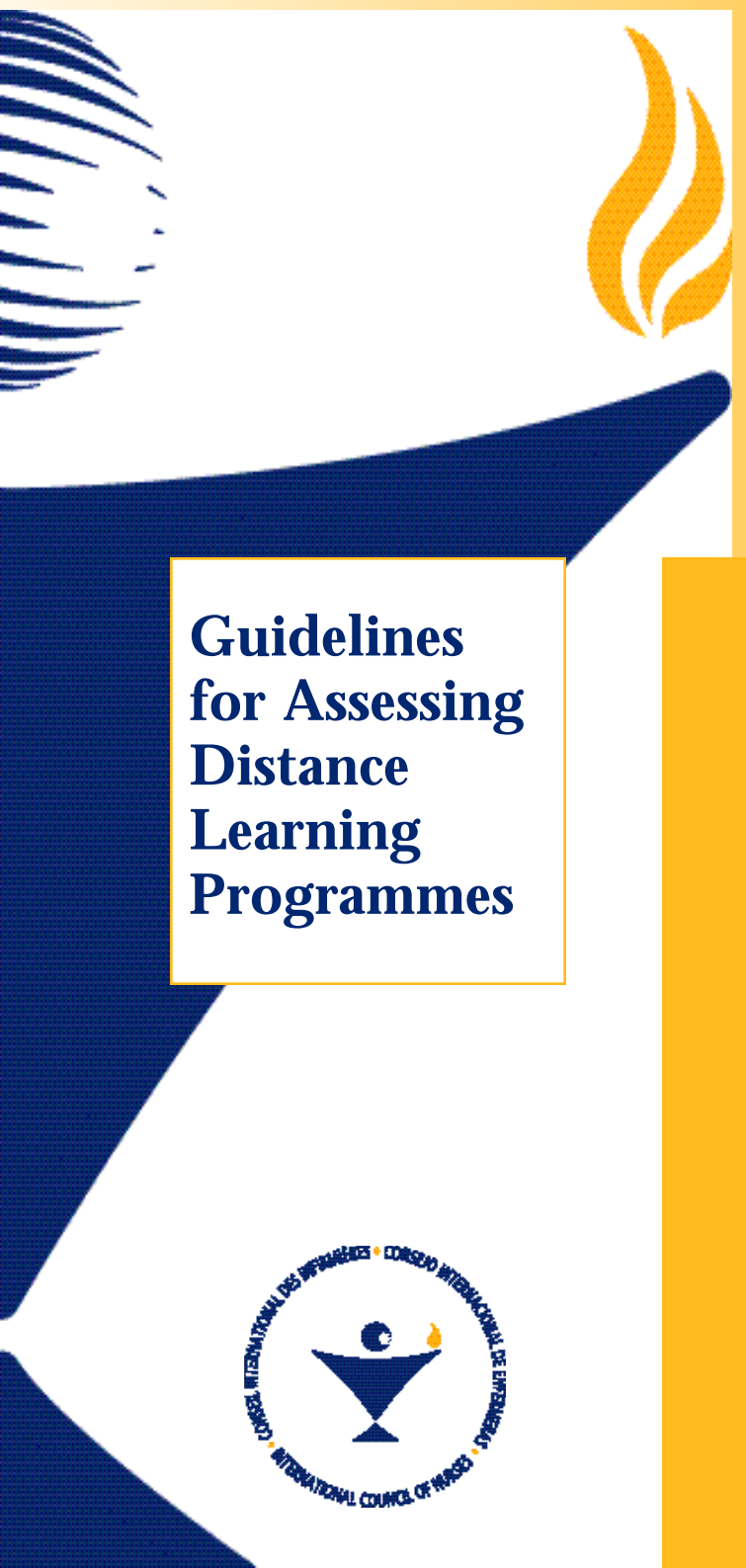




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Guidelines for Assessing Distance Learning Programmes



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INTRODUCTION

The considerable growth and popularity of learning at a distance, and the rising number of institutions world-wide offering such programmes makes selecting well designed, properly administered and recognised programmes complex. Added to the difficulties of identifying good and credible programmes are unfamiliarity with this mode of educational delivery, and little knowledge about provider institutions with very different educational systems and which may be located thousands of miles away.

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) asked the School of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Sheffield to prepare a set of international standards for application to education offered at a distance. The finished work should:

- recommend a working definition of distance learning;
- ensure that the recommended standards are broad enough to apply internationally, yet specific enough to provide guidance in areas related to quality and credibility of the education.

Under the guidance of Dr Paula Procter, a report on the topic was prepared, drawing on the considerable expertise and experience of that institution. A focus group and, subsequently, an online discussion group were formed; discussions with a range of significant others were carried out; and an international review group was consulted. Over 300 web sites with the phrase 'Distance Learning Standards' were examined. Of these, eleven were considered worthy of further study.¹

¹ Procter, Paula, M., *International Standards for Distance Learning*. A Report Prepared for the International Council of Nurses, Geneva, ICN, 2002 (unpublished).

These guidelines are based on recommendations from the report. Additionally, they propose a set of questions that a prospective learner or purchaser of distance education can use for selecting suitable distance learning programmes.

ICN hopes that the information provided in the guidelines will contribute to making informed decisions about undertaking distance learning. The guidelines highlight the need to look critically at the feasibility of undertaking this mode of learning, the quality of the programmes available, and the credibility of the provider institution and the award given.

This information may be used by:

- persons who may be considering undertaking learning at a distance for personal and professional development;
- decision-makers (e.g. in a Ministry of Health or Health Facility) who are charged with selecting and funding distance learning programmes as part of the professional development activities for personnel;
- educators and decision-makers in educational institutions that are currently providing learning at a distance, or are considering launching distance learning programmes.

DEFINITION OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Distance Learning is where learning and teaching towards specific outcomes, professional and/or academic takes place regardless of time and geography of the learner and the teacher.

The following points support the definition:

- The quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education.
- The influences of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services distinguish it from private study and teach-yourself programmes.
- The use of technical media, print, audio, video or computer unites teacher to learner or learner to learner and carries the content of the course.
- The provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from, or even initiate, dialogue distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education.²

In many cases, career moves (including international employment experiences) improve nurses' quality of life and provide positive opportunities for personal and professional development. Nurses' career moves however must be the result of informed decisions. Nurses employed or seeking employment must have access to representative organisations (i.e. professional associations, trade unions) that will help ensure respect of their human and workers' rights.

² Robinson, K. *Open and Distance Learning for Nurses*, London, Longman, 1989, p. 20-21 cited in Procter, Paula M. *International Standards for Distance Learning*. A Report Prepared for the International Council of Nurses, Geneva, ICN, 2002 (unpublished)

STANDARDS FOR DISTANCE LEARNING

Today, there is a plethora of quality standards for distance learning education, and finding exceptional quality standards which are also acceptable to local and cultural values can be difficult. Benchmarking, where a benchmark is a standard against which others can be measured, is a good solution to these difficulties for the following reasons.

- It would be almost impossible to better an already published set of standards and using benchmarking embraces a philosophy of dynamic change.
- Acceptance of variance at local level does not detract from good work in distance learning around the world.
- Well-developed and known standards are often used as a basis for local benchmarking (Procter).

ICN guidelines are therefore based on *Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning*, March 1999 (ISBN 1 85824 429 3).³

The guidelines cover:

- System Design – the development of an integrated approach;
- the establishment of academic standards and quality in programme design, approval and review procedures;
- the assurance of quality and standards in the management of programme delivery;
- student development and support;
- student communication and representation;
- student assessment.

See Appendix 1 for an extract from and explanation of the QAAHE guidelines.

³ These standards can be accessed at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/dlg/contents.htm> (Qaa et non Gaa.ac.uk) or ordered at no cost from Linney Direct, Adamsway, Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, NG1 4FN, England, UK. Tel: +44 1623 450788; Fax: +44 1623 450629; email: qaa@linneydirect.com.

SELECTING SUITABLE AND CREDIBLE DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMMES

The growing number of distance learning programmes on offer and the range of institutions worldwide offering distance learning can make it difficult to distinguish accredited programmes with strong educational components from those leading to no recognised qualification and/or of little educational value. Therefore, ICN believes that a set of screening questions with accompanying statements can be useful in deciding if a programme of study is appropriate for a learner's need and circumstance, is of acceptable quality and offers a recognised credential.

The questions are:

1. Is the distance learning programme ***suitable for the environment, circumstances and learning needs*** of the prospective student?
2. Does the ***programme design*** fit the intended learning outcomes, the needs and goals of the learner, and the instructional technologies and methods being employed?
3. Does the provider institution have a ***learner support system*** to assist in the effective use of the resources and learning opportunities provided?
4. Does the provider institution sustain an ***administrative commitment*** to quality distance learning?

PROGRAMME SUITABILITY

Is the distance learning programme suitable for the environment, circumstances and learning needs of the prospective learner?

Amplifying statements

The programme method of delivery fits the demographic profile of the learners, taking account of the previous skills, knowledge and experience, the circumstances in which the learner will be studying, and their learning preferences.

The programme is sensitive to work schedules, geographic isolation and other unique situations of learners allowing them to manage work in a way that gives them control over the time and pace of learning.

The programme acknowledges individual learning preferences or special circumstances by allowing flexibility in assignments and multiple means of content delivery.

The programme is affordable.

There is adequate initial information about admission requirements, the language/s of instruction, programme content, learning methods, modes of assessment and intended outcomes to enable informed decision-making about the programme.

The programme information includes details about learning opportunities being offered, the costs entailed for registering and completing the programme, time commitments required, equipment necessary and other resources required to be in place (e.g. access to local library, teacher) and the type of credentials/qualifications awarded.

The programme information states clearly the entitlements, responsibilities, accountability and liabilities of each of the parties involved (e.g. learner, provider institution, local agents, teachers), including status and rights of learners and procedures for appeals, complaints and grievances.

The credential/qualification awarded is recognised in the learner's country, as well as being recognised in the country of the provider institution.

PROGRAMME DESIGN

Does the programme design fit the intended learning outcomes, the needs and goals of the learner and the instructional technologies and methods being employed?

Amplifying statements

There are clear statements of intended learning outcomes.

The selection and application of technologies used in the programme are appropriate for the intended learning outcomes and content matter.

If the programme contains multiple courses, it demonstrates consistency among the courses by using similar course design, communication and technology methods and assessment approaches.

The academic standard of the programme is comparable with standards of a programme delivered by the provider institution using more traditional ways.

The programme engages learners in active and continual learning, e.g. case studies, journal writing, role-playing, problem-solving, class discussions, and project work.

Communication and interaction (learner to teacher or learner to learner) is through the use of e-mail, telephone, video, discussion forums, online chats, etc. and is built into the programme.

The programme includes learning assessments related to learning outcomes.

The modes of assessment used are responsive to the learning styles of individual learners, providing systematic, constructive, frequent and timely feedback.

The assessment methods are designed to assist learners to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and to guide their progress by documenting what learners

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know, and what they can do as a result of learning experiences.

There is evidence that the programme is periodically evaluated for the purpose of quality control and improvement.

Evaluation includes assessing the currency of content, appropriate use of technology, effectiveness of delivery strategies, adequacy of student support facilities, the validity and reliability of assessment methods and the successful integration of courses within the larger curriculum.

SUPPORT THE NEEDS OF LEARNERS

Does the provider institution have a learner support system to assist in the effective use of the resources and learning opportunities provided?

Amplifying statements

Orientation is given to the process of learning at a distance, including programme prerequisites, modes of study and communication, evaluation criteria, learner support services, and level of competence necessary for the use of equipment and technology required for studies.

Orientation includes preparation for self-direction in study and management of own learning.

The provider institution offers convenient and flexible assistance, and access for scheduling, registration, record keeping, technical assistance and library and information services.

There is an organised and easily accessible student advising and counselling service.

Learner support services and resources provided by the institution are specified clearly, are accessible and usable by the learners, and are sufficiently flexible to accommodate different learning styles.

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT

Does the provider institution sustain an administrative commitment to quality distance learning?

Amplifying statements

The distance learning programmes on offer are consistent with the mission and policy framework of the provider institution.

There is evidence that the provider institution makes a financial and administrative commitment to maintain, evaluate and improve distance learning programmes, and the supportive structures needed by faculty and learners to create an effective learning environment.

Teachers are adequately prepared to use distance learning technologies and to develop appropriate learning resources.

The provider institution recognises learner achievement accomplished at a distance in a fashion similar to that of learning accomplished through more traditional means.

The provider institution has the appropriate accreditation to award recognised certificates, diploma, degrees etc. to persons acquiring qualification through distance learning programmes.

APPENDIX

Using the QAAHE Guidelines⁴

ICN recommends that the QAAHE guidelines be used as a framework to review existing distance learning standards, or to develop new standards. For each guideline, there are a number of precepts or key principles to be applied. The precepts identify critical features an institution or programme might be reasonably expected to demonstrate in the delivery of quality distance learning. These are accompanied by outline guidance statements offering direction on quality improvement and control for institutions to use and develop further according to needs, traditions, cultures, economic feasibility and decision-making processes.

EXAMPLE

Guideline 4: Student development and support Precept 15

With respect to students taught at a distance, a providing institution should give explicit attention to its responsibility for supporting and promoting autonomous learning and enabling learners to take personal control of their own development. An institution should set realistic aims, devise practical methods for achieving them, and monitor its practice.

Outline guidance for guideline 4

An institution should consider as a matter of policy how far its distance learning activities are intended to promote autonomous learning and to enable students studying at a distance to take further control of their own development.

⁴ *Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning*, Gloucester. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, March 1999 (ISBN 1 85824 429 3)

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In order to achieve this guideline and this precept, an institution should give attention to, and make explicit statements (including statements to students) about:

- *its aims in promoting student development and autonomous learning, how far achieving these aims will be integral to the programme of study and what means it will use to promote the stated aims;*
- *the extent to which the institution will make educational and personal guidance available and the manner in which any such guidance will be provided;*
- *the extent to which professional and/or vocational information and guidance is provided and how any such guidance will be made available;*
- *the processes by which it will evaluate the effectiveness of the action taken to secure its stated aims and how it will use feedback to enhance institutional performance.*

Each guideline is accompanied by a number of exemplifying questions, which can be used to assist with the process of benchmarking. Consideration of these questions should aid in identifying variations to the benchmark standards, signalling areas where action is needed or aspects where social, cultural or economic influences make change unacceptable or currently not feasible. Thus an awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the system of distance learning in place is built up for future action.

The questions can be used to set an action plan for development and as a template for annual evaluation of the provision of distance learning. It is suggested that a single guideline be considered in its entirety prior to considering other guidelines.

EXEMPLIFYING QUESTIONS FOR GUIDELINE 4

- *What, if any, orientation, support, advice or assistance do we provide to students initially in order to prepare them for self-direction in their studies and for the management of their learning?*
- *What support do we give to students as part of their orientation in order to help them to become competent in the use of equipment and technology integral to their study?*
- *Do we notify students of a named person to contact should they have general questions concerning their programme of study or questions on problems of studying at a distance in higher education? Do we tell students what forms of communication they should use – for example, by phone at specific times, by correspondence, by email, by fax? Do we inform students of the institution's quality standards in acknowledging and responding to enquiries?*
- *What help, counselling or advisory services do we make available to students for them to consult at their discretion?*
- *How do we respond to students who indicate that they are having difficulties with their studies?*
- *What, if any, facilities and support services, beyond those forming an integral part of a student's particular programme of study, are we providing to create a learning environment?*
- *What responsibility, if any, do we assign to a local agent to create a general learning environment accessible locally to students studying on a distance learning programme of study?*
- *How do we handle students' applications for deferments of their programmes – within the*

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limits of what the regulations allow – and how do we evaluate applications that involve checking the validity of circumstances that make applications for special treatment permissible?

- *Should our students on distance learning programmes of study have access to professional and/or vocational guidance on the same basis as students on campus? If so, how should we ensure this?*
- *If professional and/or vocational guidance is not made available to students studying at a distance, has this been made explicit in initial information for applicants and students?*
- *Should we be providing students on distance learning programmes of study with information about publicly available careers information and guidance and, if so, how should we do this?*
- *What means do we have for gaining feedback on the effectiveness of action taken to achieve the institution's aims in encouraging student development and providing support? What commitments do we make for acting on feedback?*

RESOURCES

1. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. **Guidelines on the Quality of Distance Learning.** These standards, endorsed by ICN, can be accessed at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/dlg/contents.htm#top> or ordered at no cost from Linney Direct, Adamsway, Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, NG1 4FN, England, UK. Tel: +44 1623 450788; Fax: +44 1623 450629.
2. Sherry, L., **Issues in Distance Learning.** *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 1 (4), 337-365. 1996. <http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~lsherry/pubs/issues.html> (accessed June 2003).
3. **The Commonwealth of Learning (COL)**
An intergovernmental organisation created by the Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage development and sharing of open/distance education knowledge, resources and technology. An introduction to open and distance learning, a glossary of terms and a series of start-up guides aimed at educational professionals relatively new to distance education can be downloaded from this site. The documents can also be obtained free of charge directly from COL.

In co-operation with the Asian Development Bank and the International Extension College in the UK, COL has produced six comprehensive manuals for use in training distance educators. The training 'toolkits' include a set of case studies that are used for all six topics. Contact COL directly about Training Toolkits:
The Commonwealth of Learning
Suite 600 1285 West Broadway
Vancouver, BC V6H 3X8, Canada
Tel: +1 604 755 8200; Fax: +1 604 755 8210
Email: info@col.org
Web: <http://www.col.org>
(accessed June 2003)

4. **The Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC)**, www.odlqc.org.uk (accessed June 2003)

The Open & Distance Learning Quality Council is an independent body that was set up in 1969 at the request of the UK Government. It publishes standards for open and distance learning (last revised in February 2000), and provides advice on how to select a suitable programme, as well as learner support. It also operates a voluntary registration scheme of providers who meet its standards.

5. **Distance Education at a Glance**, <http://www.uidaho.edu/eo/distglan.html> (accessed June 2003)

An online guide to help teachers, administrators, facilitators, and students understand distance education.

6. **Distance Learning Primer**, <http://www.phppo.cdc.gov/phtn/primer.asp> (accessed June 2003)

Prepared for the Public Health Training network of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the primer gives the first principles of any subject. Although this primer may not have all principles, it covers general information and provides a glossary.

7. The **United States Distance Learning Association**, <http://www.usdla.org/> (accessed June 2003)

The **USDLA Journal** can be downloaded from this site. The journal is dedicated to the dissemination of on-going distance learning research, practice and information and assessment of distance learning technologies in the USA and internationally.

8. The American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC), **ADEC Guiding Principles for Distance Learning**, www.adec.edu/admin/papers/distance_learning_principles.html (accessed June 2003)

9. Indiana Higher Education Telecommunications System, **Guiding Principles for Faculty in Distance Learning**, http://www.ihets.org/progserv/education/distance/guiding_principles (accessed June 2003)

A set of guidelines which defines good practice in distance learning from the faculty perspective of teaching and learning. Intended to give faculty a clear benchmark for designing, developing, delivering, and assessing distance learning courses and/or programmes.

10. **The Brevard Community College (BCC) Virtual Classroom**, <http://www.brevard.cc.fl.us> (accessed June 2003)

BCC provides an example of a virtual classroom. This site has good student support services. It also has a quiz allowing a student to find out whether he/she is likely to be a successful online student. It can be accessed at:

http://www.brevard.cc.fl.us/distancelearning/survey/dl_for_me_start.cfm

11. **Distance Education Clearinghouse**, <http://www.uwex.edu/disted> (accessed June 2003)

The Distance Education Clearinghouse is a comprehensive and widely recognised web site bringing together distance education information from Wisconsin, national, and international sources. New information and resources are added to the Distance Education Clearinghouse on a continual basis.