



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

POLICY AND GUIDANCE

**FLEXIBLE AND DISTRIBUTED LEARNING,
including e-Learning and Distance Learning**

2008

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1. Introduction

This document summarises the University's guidance on Flexible and Distributed Learning (FDL) which at Oxford largely covers programmes which are delivered using a large component of distance learning and/or e-learning. It draws on the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA)¹ guidance on FDL which is contained in their 'Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education'.² This is a statement of good practice which has been endorsed by the higher education community, and is used by the QAA in its audit and review processes.³ This guidance has been drawn up in consultation with the Technology-Assisted Lifelong Learning (TALL) group in the Department for Continuing Education, the Learning Technologies Group (LTG) in OUCS and the Disability Office.

The Education Committee also provides guidance on collaboration, the establishment of new courses, on major changes to existing courses, and on graduate programmes. <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/guidance/>. If, having read the guidance below, it is still unclear whether the particular provision comes within the compass of this document, reference may be made to the flowchart in the Appendix, which cross refers to other relevant guidance.

2. Characteristics of FDL

The QAA defines 'Flexible and distributed learning' (FDL) as 'educational provision leading to an award, or to specific credit toward an award, of an awarding institution delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through means which generally do not require the student to attend particular classes or events at particular times and particular locations.'

The defining feature of FDL is that the student works on their own, without face-to-face contact with tutors or other students, for all or part of their course. FDL is characterized by approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that:

- 'do not require a student's place of study to be physically located within the institution (the awarding institution) whose academic award is being sought through successful completion of the programme of study;
- do not assume that a student's programme of study is necessarily delivered directly by the awarding institution;
- do not assume that a student is necessarily directly supported by staff of the awarding institution;
- do not assume that a student is routinely working with other students; and
- do not necessarily require assessment of a student's achievement to take place at the location of the awarding institution.'

¹ An independent body funded by subscriptions from UK universities and colleges of higher education whose role is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education.

² <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section2/collab2004.pdf>

³ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp>

FDL may include programmes which include considerable elements of distance learning (learning from home or ‘self-study’) and may include learning that uses digital materials and/or communication with tutors by email (e-learning). FDL includes courses that may be delivered directly by the University or wholly or partly through collaborators.⁴ For the QAA, FDL encompasses a range of learning methodologies depending on the extent to which the student learns:

- through face-to-face teaching/supervision, or through digital materials and communication
- largely alone, or with a group of learners
- at home (‘distance learning’), or on site at the University

The QAA illustrates this as follows:

‘At one end of this continuum programme delivery, learner support and assessment are all provided directly by staff of the awarding institution at the awarding institution. The other end of this continuum could be represented by an individual ‘distance-learner’ who may have no direct contact with the awarding institution, its staff or other students, whose programme of study may be delivered through an organisation (the programme presenter) which is not the awarding institution, and whose support for learning may be available from an organisation (the support provider) which is part neither of the programme presenter nor the awarding institution.

Between these extremes is a spectrum encompassing various FDL elements as part of on-campus study, and a range of forms of arrangements involving the awarding institution and, perhaps, support-providing and/or collaborating partner organisations. In addition, wherever located, the student might be engaged in learning, support and/or assessment which are ICT or internet based, in which case the learning element of the mode might be referred to as ‘e-mode’ learning.’

FDL presents potential risks for students and the University because part of the learning takes place away from the home institution, and may involve an external partner. The aim of these notes is to help manage these risks so that Oxford may widen learning opportunities in line with its academic strategy but without prejudice either to the academic standard of its awards or the quality of provision to students. Likewise, the QAA has identified this as an area raising particular quality as well as technical issues.⁵

⁴ In such cases, the specific guidance on collaborative provision as well as the guidance on FDL should be followed.

⁵ See part B of ‘ Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)’: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section2/collab2004.pdf>

3. Current provision of FDL at the University

The majority of programmes awarded by Oxford are still predominantly taught and/or supervised face-to-face at the University by University and/or college academic staff. Nonetheless, ICT tools such as WebLearn⁶ are now an important feature of our residential undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Therefore flexible electronic provision of learning supports the traditional Oxford teaching model.

The Department for Continuing Education (OUDCE) Technology-Assisted Lifelong Learning Unit (TALL) is the main providers of courses which contain a significant e-learning and/or distance learning element. These include the following award bearing courses:

- Master of Studies in International Human Rights Law
- Postgraduate Diploma in Paediatric Infectious Diseases (under development)
- Postgraduate Certificate in Nanotechnology
- Undergraduate Advanced Diploma in Computing
- Undergraduate Advanced Diploma in Local History
- Undergraduate Diploma in Computing

as well as a growing number of accredited and unaccredited short online courses.⁷

⁶ WebLearn allows members of the University to create and store materials electronically to support their teaching, research, and administration activities. Commonly it is used to house hand-outs, reading lists, presentations, student discussion areas, feedback forms and multiple-choice tests.

⁷ The full list of FDL courses offered by OUDCE is available at: <http://onlinecourses.conted.ox.ac.uk/>

4. The QAA precepts for FDL

Responsible bodies⁸ should take account of the QAA guidance below when introducing new courses or reviewing existing courses with a significant element of FDL. The QAA guidance on FDL consists of a series of principles (which they call ‘precepts’), and for ease of reference, this section provides a list of those precepts. The numbering and lettering used by the QAA have been retained. Detailed descriptions of these precepts can be found at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section2/collab2004.pdf>

The QAA make a distinction between precepts which are specific to the nature of FDL (e.g. the greater vigilance required to remote ensure learners receive support) and more general good practice precepts that apply to educational provision, regardless of whether it is delivered by FDL or more traditional means. This distinction is repeated below.

Precepts specific to FDL

Outline study plan and schedule

‘B1: Students should have access to:

- documents that set out the respective responsibilities of the awarding institution and the programme presenter for the delivery of an FDL programme or element of study;
- descriptions of the component units or modules of an FDL programme or element of study, to show the intended learning outcomes and teaching, learning and assessment methods of the unit or module;
- a clear schedule for the delivery of their study materials and for assessment of their work.
- a designated support person to whom they can report problems in accessing material.’

Delivery systems and quality

‘B2: The awarding institution, whether or not working through a programme presenter, should ensure that students can be confident that:

- any FDL programme or element offered for study has had the reliability of its delivery system tested, and that contingency plans would come into operation in the event of the failure of the designed modes of delivery;
- the delivery system of an FDL programme or element of study delivered through e-learning methods is fit for its purpose, and has an appropriate availability and life expectancy;

⁸ Faculty boards in the Humanities, the divisional boards for Social Sciences, MPLS and Medical Sciences, the board of Continuing Education

- the delivery of any study materials direct to students remotely through, for example, e-learning methods or correspondence, is secure and reliable, and that there is a means of confirming its safe receipt'

Student expectations

'B3: Prospective students should receive a clear and realistic explanation of the expectations placed upon them for study of the FDL programme or elements of study, and for the nature and extent of autonomous, collaborative and supported aspects of learning.'

Learner support

'B4: Students should have access to:

- a schedule for any learner support available to them through timetabled activities, for example tutorial sessions or web-based conferences;
- clear and up to date information about the learning support available to them locally and remotely for their FDL programme or elements of study;
- documents that set out their own responsibilities as learners, and the commitments of the awarding institution and the support provider (if appropriate) for the support of an FDL programme or element of study.'

'B5: Students should have:

- from the outset of their study, an identified contact, either local or remote through email, telephone, fax or post, who can give them constructive feedback on academic performance and authoritative guidance on their academic progression;
- where appropriate, regular opportunities for inter-learner discussions about the programme, both to facilitate collaborative learning and to provide a basis for facilitating their participation in the quality assurance of the programme;
- appropriate opportunities to give formal feedback on their experience of the programme.'

'B6: The awarding institution, whether or not working through a support provider, should be able to ensure that students can be confident that:

- staff who provide support to learners on FDL programmes have appropriate skills, and receive appropriate training and development;
- support for learners, whether delivered through staff of a support provider or through web-based or other distribution channels, meets specified expectations of the awarding institution for the quality of learner support for a programme of study leading to one of its awards.'

Assessment and feedback

‘B7: Students should have access to:

- information on the ways in which their achievements will be judged, and the relative weighting of units, modules or elements of the programme in respect of assessment overall;
- timely formative assessment on their academic performance to provide a basis for individual constructive feedback and guidance, and to illustrate the awarding institution's expectations for summative assessment.’

Security and reliability

‘B8: The awarding institution, whether or not working through a programme presenter or support provider, should ensure that students can be confident that:

- their assessed work is properly attributed to them, particularly in cases where the assessment is conducted through remote methods that might be vulnerable to interception or other interference;
- those with responsibility for assessment are capable of confirming that a student's assessed work is the original work of that student only, particularly in cases where the assessment is conducted through remote methods⁹;
- any mechanisms, such as web-based methods or correspondence, for the transfer of their work directly to assessors, are secure and reliable, and that there is a means of proving or confirming the safe receipt of their work.’

More general precepts

These precepts have been slightly adapted from section 2 of the QAA Code of Practice which refers to both collaborative provision and FDL.

Responsibility for, and equivalence of, academic standards

A2. The academic standards of all awards made under a FDL arrangements should meet the expectations of the UK Academic Infrastructure.¹⁰

Policies, procedures and information

A4. An up-to-date and authoritative record of the awarding institution's collaborative partnerships and agents, should form part of the institution's publicly available information. This also applies to FDL programmes where these warrant a separate identification.¹¹

⁹ See section on plagiarism below

¹⁰ That is, the QAA's Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education; the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland; subject benchmark statements; and programme specifications. <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/default.asp>

A5. The awarding institution should inform any professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB), which has approved or recognised a programme that is the subject of a possible or actual collaborative arrangement, of its proposals and of any final agreements which involve the programme. This applies equally to programmes for which significant FDL arrangements are developed after the programme has been approved or recognised. In any case, the status of the programme in respect of PSRB recognition should be made clear to prospective students.

A7. FDL arrangements should be fully costed and should be accounted for accurately and fully.

Selecting a partner organisation or agent

A11. The agreement or contract should make clear that any 'serial' arrangement whereby the partner organisation offers approved FDL provision elsewhere or assigns, through an arrangement of its own, powers delegated to it by the awarding institution, may be undertaken only with the express written permission of the awarding institution in each instance. The awarding institution is responsible for ensuring that it retains proper control of the academic standards of awards offered through any such arrangements.

Assuring academic standards and the quality of programmes and awards

A12. The awarding institution is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the quality of learning opportunities offered through FDL arrangements is adequate to enable a student to achieve the academic standard required for its award.

A14. The scope, coverage and assessment strategy of programmes offered through FDL arrangements should be described in a programme specification that refers to relevant subject benchmark statements and the level of award, and that is readily available and comprehensible to stakeholders.

A18. The awarding institution should ensure that arrangements for admission to FDL programme take into account the precepts of Section 10 of the Agency's Code of practice on Student recruitment and admissions (2001), or any successor document.

FDL arrangements that involve other organisations

A15. The awarding institution should make appropriate use of the Code¹² to ensure that all aspects of the Code relevant to the collaborative arrangement are addressed by itself and/or the partner organisation, and should make clear respective responsibilities of the awarding institution and a partner organisation in terms of addressing the precepts of the Code. This applies equally to FDL arrangements that involve other organisations.

A16. In the case of a FDL arrangement with a partner organisation, or engagement with an agent, the awarding institution should be able to satisfy itself that the terms and conditions that were originally approved have been, and continue to be, met.

¹¹ This would be the 'Register of Collaborative Agreements' at the University of Oxford, which is maintained by the Academic Policy Support Section.

¹² The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp>

A17. The awarding institution should be able to satisfy itself that staff in a partner organisation engaged in delivering or supporting a FDL programme are appropriately qualified for their role, and that the partner organisation has effective measures to monitor and assure the proficiency of such staff.

Assessment requirements

A19. The awarding institution is responsible for ensuring that the outcomes of assessment for a programme provided under a collaborative or FDL arrangement meet the specified academic level of the award as defined in the FHEQ¹³, in the context of the relevant subject benchmark statement(s).

External examining

A21. External examining procedures for programmes offered through FDL arrangements should be consistent with the awarding institution's normal practices.

A23. External examiners of FDL programmes must receive briefing and guidance approved by the awarding institution sufficient for them to fulfil their role effectively.

Certificates and transcripts

A24. An awarding institution should ensure that it has sole authority for awarding certificates and transcripts relating to the programmes of study delivered through FDL arrangements.

Information for students

A25 The minimum level of information that prospective and registered students should have about an FDL programme is the programme specification approved by the awarding institution. .

A26. The information made available to prospective students and those registered on a FDL programme should include information to students about the appropriate channels for particular concerns, complaints and appeals, making clear the channels through which they can contact the awarding institution directly.

A27. The awarding institution should monitor regularly the information given to students registered on an FDL programme.

Publicity and marketing

A28. The awarding institution should ensure that it has effective control over the accuracy of all public information, publicity and promotional activity relating to provision offered through FDL arrangements.

¹³ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/default.asp>

5. Equivalence of standards

In the case of FDL, particular thought needs to be given to parallels and equivalences with face-to-face learning, e.g. in the areas of provision of tutorial sessions, web-based conferencing and on-line contacts between tutors and student, and between groups of students. Where some students study for the same award by FDL and some by traditional means, their results and feedback on their experience should be compared and evaluated.

6. Avoiding plagiarism

The University defines plagiarism as ‘the copying or paraphrasing of other people’s work or ideas into your own work without full acknowledgement. All published and unpublished material, whether in manuscript, printed or electronic form, is covered under this definition. Collusion is another form of plagiarism involving the unauthorised collaboration of students (or others) in a piece of work. Cases of suspected plagiarism in assessed work are investigated under the disciplinary regulations concerning conduct in examinations. Intentional or reckless plagiarism may incur severe penalties, including failure of your degree or expulsion from the university.’

The ease of finding and copying information from the Internet has made plagiarism more prominent, and this applies as much to students on courses that involve a considerable proportion of distance and e-learning as to students studying through more traditional methods. Precept B8 in section 5 above states that ‘those with responsibility for assessment are capable of confirming that a student's assessed work is the original work of that student only, particularly in cases where the assessment is conducted through remote methods.’

Considerable guidance to students, faculties/departments and colleges on avoiding plagiarism is available on the Education Committee website:

<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism/index.shtml>.

To help students avoid plagiarism, the Education Committee asks divisions, faculties and departments to ensure the following:

a) Subject handbooks and websites provide links to the Education Committee web pages. In conjunction with this link, individual subject handbooks/websites should provide:

- The University definition of plagiarism
(<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism/index.shtml>);
- Appropriate subject-specific guidance on plagiarism, including a range of relevant examples;
- Specific guidance on academic good practice and topics such as time management, note-taking, referencing, research and library skills and information literacy (see <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism/acadgdprac.shtml>);
- Each subject should either produce or refer students to a style guide to inform them about appropriate referencing practice.

b) Faculty/departmental induction sessions should always incorporate separate sessions on good academic practice and the avoidance of plagiarism, which should include advice on note-taking, referencing practice and study skills. They should also emphasise how different university learning methods are from those employed at school. Further sessions on plagiarism and academic practice should be organised as students prepare to undertake projects and dissertations.

c) Faculty/departmental guidance should also consider the particular needs of students who are non-native speakers of English.

Electronic screening for plagiarism for selected courses was introduced from Hilary Term 2007 for written work submitted for examinations using 'Turnitin' software. The software compares candidates' submitted work with a wide range of material (both published and unpublished), and it will also compare the work of different candidates to test for collusion. More information is provided at: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/proctors/turnitin1.shtml>

7. Assistance with the introduction of ICT in learning at Oxford

There are two areas in which e-learning is being taken forward at Oxford University.

- ICT to assist traditional teaching methods
- ICT for distance learning

ICT to assist traditional teaching methods

ICT can be used to assist the 'traditional' teaching methods of Oxford - tutorials, seminars, lectures, lab work, etc. The focus for this activity in the University is the Learning Technologies Group (LTG) based at Oxford University Computing Services (<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ltg/>). The LTG supports all divisions within the University of Oxford in the development and innovative use of ICT in teaching and research by:

- running and providing advice on the use of WebLearn – Oxford's Virtual Learning Environment
- assisting academics to develop computer packages for use in their teaching or research through the Academic Computing Development Team
- training staff and students in basic ICT skills, and advanced uses of ICT for learning, teaching, and research via its extensive ICT learning programme
- researching and advising in all areas of e-learning applicable to the University.

In addition the LTG is responsible for such key projects as work on digital video and multimedia; advising and assisting in grant applications related to e-learning; and building up Oxford's national profile in this area.

ICT for distance learning

ICT can also be used as a learning tool for distance learning, and assistance can be gained through the Technology-Assisted Lifelong Learning (TALL) unit (<http://www.tall.ox.ac.uk/>), based at the Department for Continuing Education. TALL design, develop and deliver all FDL programmes offered by the Department for Continuing Education and also work with other University departments and the wider university sector to develop and deliver high quality distance learning solutions. The unit can advise on strategic, pedagogical, and technical issues in a number of areas including:

- Designing and developing online courses
- Delivering distance learning programmes and supporting distance learning students
- Designing blended learning solutions (integrating face-to-face and distance learning)
- Tools to support distance learning
- Electronic assignment submission
- Design and delivery of online collaborative spaces

TALL have a team of developers and can develop websites, multimedia resources and database solutions, as well as online courses, on a consultancy basis. The unit also carries out a programme of externally-funded research to investigate pragmatic e-learning solutions to support distance learning.

8. ICT and Accessibility

Accessibility issues are now high on the agenda due to the Disabilities Discrimination Act (1995) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA, 2001).

The SENDA legislation makes it illegal for higher education institutions to:

- Treat disabled people less favourably than their non-disabled peers, for a reason relating to their disability;
- Fail to provide reasonable adjustments for disabled students.

SENDA and the revised Disability Equality Duty require higher education institutions to identify aspects of teaching and learning which may be barriers for students with disabilities, establish how these might be adjusted to allow the full participation of students with disabilities.

SENDA is an anticipatory Act, which means that higher education institutions owe a duty to disabled people as a whole, and not just to registered students. The development of websites has not always taken into consideration the needs of disabled people. Therefore, colleges and faculties/departments must to make their websites accessible regardless of whether they currently have disabled students enrolled or not.

The students most likely to experience difficulties in accessing websites are those students who find accessing printed material difficult, namely, students with visual impairments and those with learning difficulties, such as dyslexia. However, profoundly deaf students and some students with physical disabilities may also experience difficulty accessing the web due to the type of language used and the physical navigation requirements of websites respectively.

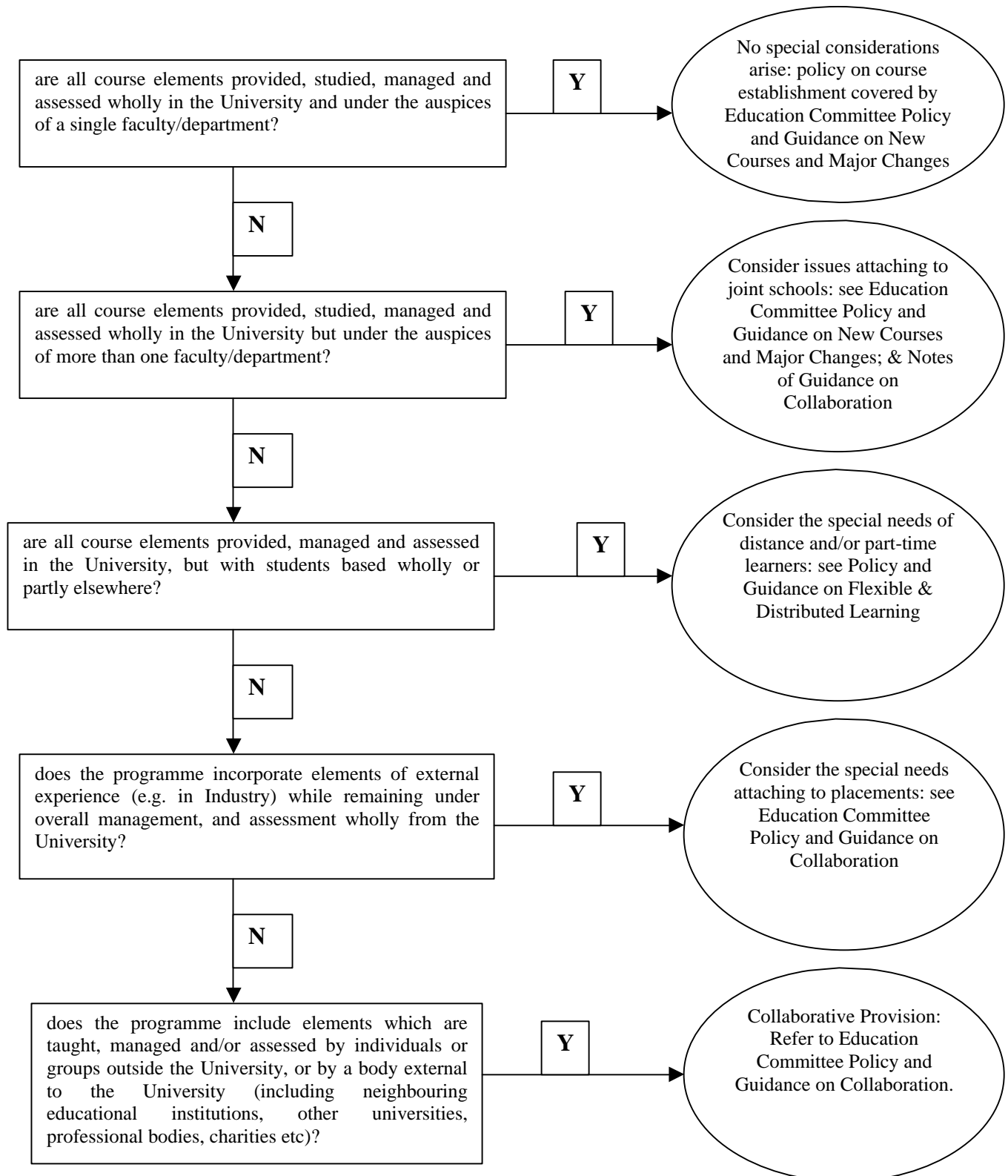
Many disabled students use a range of adaptive technology (both hardware and software) that enables them to use computers and indeed the Internet. However, in order for adaptive technology to work in conjunction with the Internet, websites must contain certain accessibility design features.

The Learning Technologies Group and Technology-Assisted Lifelong Learning unit, can provide assistance with ensuring that websites are accessible. Written information is available at: http://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/site/info/docs/access_guide/

Further guidance on the Disabilities Discrimination Act and SENDA is available from the University's Diversity and Equal Opportunities Unit (<http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/disab/>) and from HEFCE's Joint Information Systems Committee (<http://www.jisclegal.ac.uk/disability/accessibility.htm>).

Appendix: Which 'Policy and Guidance' document(s) should I use?

*Note: The usefulness of the chart as a guide depends on careful thought about where and how programmes are: **provided, studied, assessed, and managed***



Important Note: some provision may involve more than one of these elements: e.g. part-time and/or distance learners, placements and collaboration; in this case the special needs arising from each set of circumstances must be considered.