

## Flexible learning: a practical guide for academic staff

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# Contents

<b>Section</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Section 1 - Context</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1. What are the drivers for flexible learning?	5
Case study 1 – Strategy to grow online distance learning programmes	6
1.2. What are the challenges?	7
1.3. Can existing quality management systems support flexible learning?	8
Case study 2 – Strategic approach to the development of work-based learning programmes	9
1.4. How does flexible learning impact on my role?	10
1.5. How do I balance the development of flexible learning initiatives with my existing workload?	11
<b>Section 2 – Supporting the student journey</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1. How do I support students in agreeing a programme of study?	12
Table 1: Comparison of work-based learning and structured learning	12
Case study 3 – Work-based learning - responding to business needs	13
2.2. What is my role in the admissions process?	14
Case study 4 – Supporting an APEL claim	15
2.3. How do I support induction?	16
Case study 5: Induction of distance learning students	17
2.4. How do I support student learning?	18
2.5. Are there any differences in the assessment processes?	19
Case study 6: Staffordshire University - two-year fast-track degrees	19
2.6. What is the role of the external examiner?	21
2.7. What is my role in providing information on post-programme opportunities?	22
<b>Section 3 – Additional information and resources</b>	<b>23</b>

## Preface

Over the last two decades there has been a significant increase in the offer of flexible learning by higher education (HE) providers in the UK from both universities and further education colleges who offer higher education courses. This has occurred because of a number of factors, including the increased diversity of the student market, the internationalisation of higher education, and the advancement of technology in every walk of life.

The policy of widening participation has sharpened awareness that many more learners are capable of achieving a higher qualification if the conditions for learning are right. Those with caring responsibilities for younger or older relatives, those who choose to study alongside work, those with a disability and those who live in countries or regions where there is a short supply of readily accessible higher education (to name but a few) may all benefit from forms of flexible learning which enable them to have more control over the pace, place and mode of their study. The higher rates of fees now payable, or debts incurred for study, may encourage more learners to learn as they earn, as is common in the US.

The pace of development of mobile technologies has influenced the way in which we all, though particularly younger generations, now conduct everyday living. We expect knowledge to be at our fingertips through a few clicks into the internet; to be able to communicate instantly to friends, family and others, wherever we and they are in the world; to carry with us wherever we go the tools for entertainment and enlightenment in smaller and lighter gadgets. For higher education to ignore or fail to exploit these trends could risk it becoming alien and anachronistic for future learners.

For these reasons, UK Governments and Funding Councils have been encouraging, over a considerable period of time, the natural experimentation of higher education HE providers with flexible learning with project funding and changed funding methodologies, in particular to ensure the availability of a highly educated and skilled workforce to underpin an economy facing significant challenges. The Higher Education Academy has had a key role for the whole of its existence in supporting HE providers in these developments, through workshops, networks, conferences, publications and more.

In October 2011, the HEA convened a flexible learning summit in Leeds at which practitioners from a range of institutions and projects, covering work-based learning, online learning and accelerated degrees, shared their findings and experience. From this base, they drafted collectively a set of recommendations targeted towards government, national agencies, HE providers and practitioners, for ways to enhance flexible learning. The summit assisted the HEA in adopting a definition of flexible learning based upon pace, place and mode of learning, though we are aware that flexibility of content is also an essential issue, especially in the case of work-based learning.

In April 2012, a second summit was convened in London to share these recommendations with the target audiences, and to encourage them to adopt them as part of their future strategy. Some recommendations were targeted towards the HEA itself, including that they should 'produce separate evidence-based guides for potential learners and institutional staff on flexible learning provision'. This guide and its partner constitute the fulfilment of that undertaking. The authors have endeavoured to offer concise general guidance, acknowledging always that specific HE providers have their own regulations and procedures which will need to be consulted.

In the case of students, we have imagined the reader to be less familiar with the kinds of flexible provision that HE providers might offer, interested in either undergraduate or postgraduate provision, and possibly different from the traditional 18-year-old full-time student. In the case of staff, we have focused towards the frontline practitioner who may be less familiar, and even tentative, with flexible learning, but whose institution is interested in moving more in that direction. We are aware that these assumptions may not cover all readers, and indeed we hope the guides will offer support to a wider audience, but we have had to make some choices in order to focus our writing. For those who seek further information, we have provided reference points at the end. We have not attempted to address the many challenges which confront HE providers in embarking upon flexible learning here, as these cannot be significantly influenced by individual learners or members of staff, but the HEA has other publications which can assist in this respect.

We have taken a question and answer approach, so that the guides do not need to be read from cover to cover, but may be dipped into from time to time to address specific queries. To be as concise as possible, we have also elected to deal with flexible learning in its totality wherever possible, and to comment by exception where one form, eg work-based learning, might differ from others.

We trust that these guides will be of some assistance to you, and would be interested to hear from readers on how we might improve their form or content, and the uses to which they have been put. Please feel free to email [flexible.learning@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:flexible.learning@heacademy.ac.uk).

**Emeritus Professor Freda Tallantyre**

# Introduction

This guide has been commissioned by the Higher Education Academy to provide advice and support to academic staff who are seeking to develop and enhance their knowledge and understanding of flexible learning initiatives and to develop flexible learning programmes.

For the purposes of the guide the Higher Education Academy defines flexible learning in terms of pace, place and mode of delivery, often with an emphasis of these allowing students choices and a degree of control over when, where, how and sometimes what they learn.

**Pace** refers to accelerated and decelerated programmes including part-time learning and the recognition of prior learning. It can also include a variable pace of study within a programme's overall deadlines.

**Place** focuses on work-based learning and includes employer-responsive provision of bespoke programmes and the accreditation of in-company training programmes. Technology also now allows learners to study in places of their choice, ranging from tube trains to home to hotel rooms abroad.

**Mode** relates to the use of learning technologies in delivering flexible learning and enhancing the students' learning experience and includes distance learning and blended learning programmes. A flexibility of mode often underpins other forms of flexibility.

The guide provides good practice principles and includes six short case studies from a range of higher education institutions which have developed significant experience in developing flexible learning.

Section 1 of the guide sets the context and drivers for flexible learning and addresses a number of the challenges, including perceptions about the quality of flexible learning programmes and questions staff may have regarding the impact of flexible learning on their role.

Section 2 focuses on how to support the learner throughout their learning journey, from pre-entry guidance and admissions through to assessment and completion of the learner's flexible learning programme.

It is acknowledged that individuals accessing this guide will have a varied range of knowledge and experience of flexible learning initiatives. Some may have greater insights into the complexities and subtleties of implementing flexible learning while others may be quite new to the concept of flexible learning. Consequently for those individuals who are looking for more detailed information Section 3 provides guidance on additional information and resources.

It is anticipated that the guide will be read in a non-linear way and individuals will access those areas of the guide which are relevant to their needs.

It is also anticipated that readers of the guide are connected with institutions which have already implemented or which are intending to support the development of flexible learning.

## Section I - Context

### I.1. What are the drivers for flexible learning?

For the individual, flexible learning can meet the needs of learners who are seeking to engage in higher education qualifications by providing alternative modes of study which suit their personal circumstances. A recent report from the Higher Education Policy Institute<sup>1</sup> suggests that the main reasons students choose to study part-time are 'greater flexibility and convenience, finances, fitting studies around existing work, domestic/carer commitments and that part-time study is a less risky option than full-time'.

Flexible learning has the potential to expand the range of opportunities for individuals to access higher education at a time, pace and place to meet their needs, which traditional modes of study do not support. Flexible learning goes beyond the traditional notion of full-time or part-time learning modes of study, and includes online distance learning programmes, blended learning programmes, work-based learning programmes, and accelerated programmes. Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) frameworks, to support the accumulation of credit and transfer of credit from one institution to another, are important enablers of flexible learning. Such frameworks allow the individual the choice of engaging in a volume of study which aligns to their personal and professional needs, for example an individual may wish to initially engage in a short credit-bearing award and return at a later stage to complete the qualification.

For the higher education sector, 'opportunity', 'choice' and 'excellence' are the three key principles detailed in the HEFCE Strategy Statement (2011)<sup>2</sup> which are driving change. The student experience is at the 'heart' of these changes and student choice is having a direct impact on funding. Creating a culture and infrastructure which supports a holistic approach to flexible learning is one approach an institution may consider in developing strategies to meet these challenges and opportunities.

From the institution's perspective, this could mean expansion of markets for part-time students, international students, entry into the employer engagement market through work-based learning programmes and support for student mobility both within the UK and globally. This kind of flexibility in markets could offer institutions an advantage at a time when higher student fees and new regulations for admissions have created an unstable environment where supply and demand are not always in balance. It can also lead to the enrichment and diversification of the student body.

There are examples where flexible learning initiatives have and will continue to enhance the learning experience for all students, including those traditionally campus based. For example through technology, institutions can provide enhanced support for pre-arrival induction, engagement and retention strategies, and offer a contemporary learning environment to meet the needs and expectations of learners.

Similarly, contact with mature student markets reached by flexible learning can often create a virtuous circle of enhanced opportunities for work placements, mentors in the workplace, case study material, projects, and simulations for those not yet in work.

In some cases institutions may adopt flexible learning initiatives to respond to a particular market opportunity, for example the development of a programme(s) through online distance learning or blended learning. Such initiatives may be driven by an enthusiastic and innovative programme team and may be confined to one or two areas of the institution or be adopted across the institution.

Alternative approaches are where institutions have adapted their structures and introduced new departments who work with Faculties/Schools to spearhead the development of flexible learning. To respond to employer-responsive provision some institutions have introduced business-facing departments whose focus is to lead the strategy and grow this area of provision for the institution. To support significant investment in institutional infrastructure a number of these institutions were successful in gaining matched funding through the HEFCE Strategic Development Fund for Workforce Development Projects.

Other examples include the introduction of a separate business development department whose remit is to expand online learning programmes and oversee the online learning students' experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Maguire D (2013) Flexible Learning: Wrapping Higher Education Around the Needs Of Part-Time Students HEPI. Available from: <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/466-2142/Flexible-Learning-Wrapping-Higher-Education-Around-the-Needs-Of-Part-Time-Students.html> ?date accessed\*\*\*\*\* sorry just trying to make this stand out it

<sup>2</sup> HEFCE Strategy Statement (2011). Available from:

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/about/howweoperate/corporateplanning/strategystatement/HEFCEstrategystatement.pdf> [28 January 2013]

Case study I illustrates the strategic approach by the University of Derby to grow online distance learning programmes/students, enhance the student experience and increase opportunities for students to access higher education programmes.

#### Case study I – Strategy to grow online distance learning programmes

To spearhead the growth of online distance learning programmes and increase student satisfaction, the University of Derby launched University of Derby On-Line (UDOL) in 2011. UDOL was created to bring together existing staff (including academic, business development, student support and administrative) who had significant expertise in online learning into a new department. Their remit is to focus on online learning developments and grow online learning distance learning programmes as a core business stream for the University. Through developing new ways of working with the Faculties and the Learning Resource team the key success of UDOL has been to ensure that the support for online students has been significantly enhanced. This has been achieved by disaggregating different dimensions of the student learning experience. So, for example, sales/enquiry management, content development, tutor support and student support, are all seen as distinct and critical elements of the student journey and are led and managed by UDOL. The strategic drive to grow the number of online distance learning students, improve the student experience and expand the University's global reach is proving to be extremely successful.

While it is difficult to predict the future changes to the higher education sector, it is reasonable to conclude that the traditional distinction between full-time and part-time students will continue to blur. It is anticipated that students will continue to seek opportunities for more flexible forms of study that fit around their work and family commitments and the key driver for flexible learning will be meeting the needs of students.

## 1.2. What are the challenges?

A shift towards increased flexible delivery may be seen as threatening by some staff, raising concerns regarding their future role or anxieties about the quality of flexible learning programmes.

For example in public fora such as the Higher Education Teaching and Learning Group<sup>3</sup>, the view has been expressed that the digital revolution will radically change the shape of institutions in the future and impact on staff roles. The growth in massive open online courses (MOOCs,) for example, has provoked questions about the students' experience, about whether such initiatives are financially driven to increase income by providing low cost education, and whether taken to its extreme, staff could be replaced by a computer.

The counter view is that institutions cannot ignore emerging technologies and their potential to move away from the traditional model of delivery to meet the changing expectations of students. Moreover, experience suggests that online learning is best when supported by a human interface too.

The expansion of work-based learning programmes and growth in the accreditation of in-company training programmes have attracted concerns about academic quality and standards. A number of critics of employer-led provision may hold the view that these programmes are no more than training programmes and consequently of inferior quality to traditional higher education programmes.

However, what sets a university apart from a training provider is that learning is assessed, subject to the academic regulations of the institution and awarded credit. There are a number of institutions with significant experience of the employer engagement agenda. They have developed quality assurance processes that are equally rigorous and subject the development of employer-responsive programmes to the same level of scrutiny as traditional programmes.

Acknowledging the workplace as a site of learning can represent a significant cultural shift for a number of academics, although it is recognised that for some subject disciplines workplace learning may not be appropriate. Staff who have experience of vocational programmes and programmes that develop professional practice are more likely to appreciate workplace learning. For example, in the areas of health and education using the workplace as a site of learning has been common practice for many years.

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<sup>3</sup> The Higher Education and Learning Group (year?) Available from: <https://www.hetl.org/> [16 February 2013]

### 1.3. Can existing quality management systems support flexible learning?

Most institutions' standard quality assurance and approval processes support the delivery of flexible learning programmes in terms of pace (accelerated learning programmes) and place (distance learning/online learning programmes). The development process for these programmes can therefore be relatively straightforward.

However, with regard to the development of employer responsive programmes, including work-based learning programmes and the accreditation of in-company training, standard institutional quality assurance and approval processes will normally require some adjustments. This has been the case for institutions with significant experience in this field.

In developing an accelerated learning route to an existing programme there are substantial areas that need to be addressed during the development process and prior to the approval event. These include:-

- market research into the demand for the accelerated route;
- impact on the traditional version of the programme;
- programme structure/coherence, ie consideration of how 360 credits will be delivered in two academic years;
- student learning experience;
- student support;
- consultation with external stakeholders, for example, employers, professional bodies as appropriate, external advisers (academic peers) and current external examiners.

An area that will need to be considered during the development process is the concern that some European universities will not recognise two-year degrees, as the Bologna Process<sup>4</sup> states that a bachelor's degree should be three years. However, there is evidence that a number of professional bodies support the accelerated route, for example, accreditation by the Law Society for fast-track law degree programmes.

There are different models for structuring the delivery of 360 credits although the norm is for students to study a maximum of 180 credits per academic year. For example, the programme could be structured whereby students undertake an additional module per semester, with additional modules being delivered during the summer period, or the programme is delivered over three trimesters where students undertake a balanced workload for each trimester.

Other models of delivery which could be considered include on-campus delivery of all modules or blended learning. The latter would include a mix of on-campus delivery (for example, students may be co-taught with students on the traditional programme) combined with some modules being delivered through *online learning*.

Whichever model is adopted will inform the student learning experience in terms of teaching learning and assessment and how students access support from relevant central services departments.

For the development of programmes where the delivery includes distance learning and/or online learning the focus of the development process and approval will be similar to the issues detailed above.

In addition there would be considerable emphasis in the approval process on learning resources in terms of quality and accessibility, the level of support from central services and mechanisms for remote learners to access student support. A number of institutions require that sample learning resources are made available during the approval process and that the online learning resources have been subject to external peer review.

At a national level the degree to which the quality assurance procedures for traditional provision are fit for purpose when applied to work-based learning and employer-responsive programmes, including the accreditation of in-company training, has been the subject of significant discussion and review. In 2007 HEFCE and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) established a joint task group to determine how best to safeguard quality and standards in work-based learning. Their findings were that the existing Quality Assurance Framework was 'largely sufficient to deal with the challenges this agenda presents at this moment in time', although there was the recognition that adaptations and further guidance were required to support institutions working collaboratively with employers to develop and deliver these programmes.

In January 2010 QAA published a reflective report<sup>5</sup> which showed in more detail how the Code of Practice may be interpreted by institutions in developing employer responsive provision. Further support came from nine demonstrator projects, commissioned by

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<sup>4</sup> European Higher Education Area (year?) Available from: <http://www.ehea.info/> [24 February 2013]

<sup>5</sup> QAA (2010) Employer response provision survey: A reflective report,. Available from: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/EffectiveProvision.pdf> [3 March 2013]

the Higher Education Academy 2010<sup>6</sup>, which captured the lessons learned and good practice in managing employer responsive provision from institutions that had experience in this area.

The key messages from these projects are that institutions' quality assurance procedures need to be proportionate to the size of the award and the processes need to be responsive to employers' timescales.

The recently revised QAA UK Code for Higher Education<sup>7</sup> (2012), Section B10 'Managing higher education provision with others', which replaces the previous Section 2 'Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning', reflects the findings from the above and acknowledges the need for institutions to adopt a risk-based approach with proportionate procedures and processes for the development and approval of programmes.

Examples of how some institutions have addressed fit-for-purpose quality assurance procedures include the development of a university-wide framework. For the accreditation of in-company training such a framework would describe the principles and processes for external accreditation and cover a range of awards from minor to major.

The mapping of in-company training programmes to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and subject benchmarks normally takes place at the development stage. The approval processes are proportionate to the nature and size of the award and a number of institutions have introduced streamlined processes, for example, the use of standing approval panels with delegated powers to approve smaller awards.

Where programmes are delivered in partnership between the institutions and employer(s) there will be a formal agreement which sets out the role of each partner in the delivery of the programme. Where this includes the delivery of learning and/or assessment by the employer it is usual for the institution to retain overall responsibility for academic standards and ensuring that the learning environment for the student is appropriate.

Other examples of university-wide frameworks include the development of programme frameworks, for example, a Work-Based Learning Framework, which set out the programme aims, structure, approach to teaching, learning and assessment and may draw from existing validated modules. Such a framework normally builds in the capacity to fast track new named pathways, for minor or major awards.

A number of the above developments have been described as institutions moving towards a 'lighter touch' for the approval of programmes and revalidation of programmes in order to be more responsive to the market places and enhance efficiency. It is important to emphasise that lighter touch does not equate to lack of depth in programme development, but rather it relates to overarching frameworks and utilisation of existing validation provision, which speeds up the development and approval processes.

Case study 2 describes the approach taken by Middlesex University to develop highly responsive quality approval and quality assurance processes to support the development of work-based learning programmes and accreditation of employer-based training programmes.

#### Case study 2 – Strategic approach to the development of work-based learning programmes

Building upon its reputation for excellence in the development of work-based learning programmes, Middlesex University introduced the Institute for Work-Based Learning (IWBL), a pan-university academic centre of expertise, to provide academic leadership and develop the University's strategy for the growth of work-based learning programmes and expansion of employer-responsive provision. Through the development of an institutional Curriculum Framework for work-based learning, which covers all levels of academic awards from undergraduate to Masters level, the IWBL oversees the development of all work-based learning programmes and provides guidance and support to programme teams. The IWBL also takes the lead on the quality assurance and approval process and, over time, has developed highly responsive quality assurance mechanisms and frameworks which include a standing Programme Approval Panel. IWBL has responsibility for the University Accreditation Services for the assessment of learning from in-company training and learning from experience. IWBL staff are active in research and consultancy in work-based learning and related areas and the Work-Based Learning Research Centre attracts participation from across the University and partner organisations. IWBL has an institutional lead role for the development of higher education level 'Professional Apprenticeships'.

<sup>6</sup> Quality Assuring Employer Responsive Provision (2010). Ed Tallantyre F., Kettle J., Smith J. York: The Higher Education Academy. Available from: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/employability/employerengagement/DemonstratorProjects.pdf> [3 March 2013]

<sup>7</sup> QAA (2012) The UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Available from: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/EffectiveProvision.pdf> [3 March 2013]

## 1.4. How does flexible learning impact on my role?

The take up of flexible learning by the institution and its current status in implementing flexible learning will impact on the requirement and opportunities for you to develop the skills set to support flexible learning.

From your perspective, supporting flexible learning can open up a raft of opportunities and networks for the development of professional practice in curriculum design, innovative approaches to teaching and learning and enhancing the students' experience.

This can benefit your teaching generally by making it more exciting and varied. Finding other ways in which to transmit content may allow more time to spend on discussion, deepening and sharing learning and focusing on more problematic areas of understanding.

Many academics find it profoundly rewarding to be engaged with experienced mature students from whom they themselves can learn more about, for example, keeping up to date with developments in the work place and organisational practice.

On the other hand some academics might find the prospect of supporting highly experienced managers on a work-based learning programme somewhat daunting. They may perceive that the learner has more experience and knowledge than themselves. This may well be the case. However the role of the academic is to facilitate the students' learning from the workplace. From that perspective they will have far more expertise than the student on the learning process and how that needs to be reflected and demonstrated at higher education level.

A number of institutions who have developed substantial experience in the development of work-based learning have introduced new academic roles that specialise in this field. To support the expansion and engagement in work-based learning initiatives among the wider academic community they deliver a range of staff development activities, for example, workshops, secondments and mentoring schemes, to enable staff less experienced in these fields to develop their skills.

An area that some staff find challenging is working with new technologies to enhance student learning. A recent Horizon Report<sup>8</sup> suggests that formal training for academic staff to develop their digital literacy is non-existent and, in the main, development takes place through individuals undertaking informal learning. The report further suggests that most academics are not using new technologies for learning and teaching due to lack of time, lack of expectations to develop these skills and concern that the tools and devices take prominence over the learning. The report recommends that 'change in attitude among academics is imperative'. However such a change requires a strategic drive from the institution to recognise that these skills are necessary to facilitate, support and encourage the development of them within the academic community.

In essence being involved in flexible learning initiatives can support your continuing professional development by adding new to existing skills and enhancing your CV, should you be seeking opportunities for career progression. Many universities have created reward systems to recognise innovative approaches, with new career paths to encourage staff to diversify their directions.

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, L., Adams Becker, S., Cummins, M., Estrada, V., Freeman, A. and Ludgate, H. (2013) *NMC Horizon Report: 2013 Higher Education Edition*. Austin, Texas: The New Media Consortium

## **I.5. How do I balance the development of flexible learning initiatives with my existing workload?**

This can be a real concern for staff who currently feel they have to balance competing priorities, for example, teaching, assessment, research/scholarly activities, curriculum developments, programme management roles and availability to support students.

On the assumption that you have an already full workload, the only way you can be expected to participate in new initiatives and develop new skills is through a change in your existing priorities/workload and time being made available.

A number of institutions have developed workload management systems whereby individual workload is mutually agreed on an annual basis with your line manager. It is good practice to dovetail such discussions with a performance and development review which identifies your staff development needs and career aspirations. It is during this process that your priorities for the year should be agreed and appropriate time made available for you to develop new initiatives.

The above describes a very systematic change management process and where there is a strategic drive by the institution or Faculty to develop flexible learning initiatives, it is anticipated that in implementing the strategy, provision would be made for your development time.

However, where the development is more ad hoc and no space is set aside for development, then implementation may be more fragmented and dependent upon your good will and enthusiasm to explore new ways of teaching and learning. However, such an approach has serious and undesirable limitations, and therefore the onus is on the institution to support you in managing your workload, developing new skills and supporting you through changes to existing work practices.

## Section 2 – Supporting the student journey

### 2.1. How do I support students in agreeing a programme of study?

The opportunity for you to support students in agreeing a programme of study will depend upon the range of flexible learning qualifications your institution provides.

For example, in the design of bespoke work-based learning programmes your ability to support the learner in constructing a programme of study involves a much greater level of interaction between you and the learner than is usually found in more traditional programmes of study where the opportunities for learner choice in curricula content may be limited to options and electives.

Fundamental principles of work-based learning programmes are to give the learner a degree of autonomy in the design and negotiation of their programme of study and to recognise the value of prior learning and experience that the learner has achieved by awarding credit for their previous work experience and relevant qualifications.

The following table identifies the challenges in designing work-based learning programmes compared with traditional programmes where the programme outcomes and syllabus have been predetermined:-

Syllabus-structured	Work-based
Determined in advance	Emergent
Tutor designed	Learner-centred
Knowledge authority clear	Knowledge authority contested
A defined package of learning	A varying learning journey

Agreeing a programme of study is usually an iterative process between you and the learner. It will normally include Accreditation of Prior Learning, which could cover accredited as well as experiential learning, negotiated modules and, as appropriate, draw from existing taught modules. A number of institutions offering bespoke work-based learning programmes use Learning Contracts to formalise the negotiation process and the Learning Contract would define the expectations and learning outcomes of the programme and how they are to be assessed. The Learning Contract ensures that the quality assurance process that allows individually negotiated programmes to fit into a validated framework have been met.

For work-based learning programmes, designed and delivered in partnership with an employer, your role may also include involvement in the accreditation of in-company training.

As identified in 1.1 some institutions who have expanded into the employer engagement market have introduced business facing departments that work with employers in the early stages to identify their needs which are then translated into an award-bearing programme of study by academic specialists, with significant experience in work-based learning.

<sup>9</sup> Quality Assuring Employer Response Provision (year) Negotiating the size and credit value of work-based learning projects. Demonstrator project Chapter 3. Available from: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/employability/employerengagement/EEL\\_chapter3.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/employability/employerengagement/EEL_chapter3.pdf) [3 March 2013]

Case study 3 is an example from Swansea University highlighting how a work-based learning programme was developed to respond to the needs of economic development, business and workforce development.

### Case study 3 – Work-based learning - responding to business needs

Swansea University responded to business needs and recognised skills gaps in the Welsh biosciences sector by establishing a work-based training programme called Advanced Professional Training in Biosciences (funded through the European Social Fund). The programme provides Swansea University accredited training to business with staff training needs in ecology and laboratory skills. Modules are focused on developing skills relevant to the workplace and delivered in a blended approach to take into account time constraints and personal demands of employed adult learners. Face-to-face teaching blocks are blended with a specially developed online learning resource providing additional sources of information and formative tests to encourage self-directed learning. Assessments are aligned with the module's learning outcomes and where possible are tailored so that learners can apply their skills in their workplace to gain credit. The programme has attracted learners from diverse sectors, including conservation, food industry and biotechnology, and has up-skilled under-employed people to gain appropriate employment.

In terms of supporting students in helping them to decide the 'pace' and/or 'mode' of their programme of study your role may be to guide them through the options that are available and assist them in identifying what would best suit their individual needs and circumstances.

For example, for students wishing to engage in an accelerated learning programme, they would need to consider the time commitment required to study their degree within two years and the impact this may have on their personal circumstances and ability to engage in part-time employment to help finance their studies. Additional considerations for students are the views of future employers on the 'equivalence' of this intensive study compared with traditional programmes.

Where students are considering a distance learning programme they may need assistance in thinking through whether this form of remote learning would best suit their learning needs. Where these programmes are delivered through technology (online), practical issues of access to technology and ability to use the technology to support this mode of learning would need to be considered.

For *online learning* programmes you would also need to think through a study pattern for students, the norm being that they follow a part-time model and will normally take one module per semester/trimester. For students who wish to fast track and undertake more modules per semester, you would need to agree an appropriate study pattern with them and ensure they have considered the implications of workload and their ability to balance this with their other commitments.

A number of institutions have developed programmes for delivery through blended-learning, where the programme is delivered through a mix of face-to-face campus-based modules and online modules. The norm is that the study pattern for such programmes will have been agreed during the development and approval process of the programme and your role in agreeing a programme of study with the students may focus on pace of learning, i.e. full-time or part-time study.

## 2.2. What is my role in the admissions process?

Your role in supporting pre-entry guidance and the admissions process will vary depending upon the nature of the flexible learning programme. However, fundamental principles for pre-entry guidance and admissions are that the information about the programme is accurate and written in a user-friendly format and that the criteria for admissions are transparent, enabling the selection of candidates who have the potential to achieve a programme's intended learning outcomes.

For admissions onto an accelerated degree programme good practice suggests that potential applicants are interviewed prior to being offered a place. This would enable you to ensure that candidates fully understand the requirement of this intensive form of study and enable you to assess their ability and motivation to cope with the fast-track degree. There may be a number of logistical issues with interviewing all applicants relating to the original location of their application (for example, overseas candidates), or scalability where the number of applicants is high. However, as the two-year fast-track degree is very different from a traditional three-year programme it is important that the programme team develops a mechanism for exploring these issues with potential candidates to avoid high drop-out rates, which are not in the interests of the student or the team.

Likewise for entry onto part-time programmes delivered through distance learning/online learning, it is considered good practice to interview applicants prior to entry. This will ensure applicants are fully briefed about the requirements of the programme and allow them the opportunity to discuss any questions they may have with you directly. Interviews can be managed remotely, for example through telephone or Skype, although contacting overseas candidates who are in different time zones does make the interviewing process more challenging.

For students who have not previously engaged in remote learning, some institutions have developed 'taster materials' which are examples of the learning resources students receive on their programme. These materials are designed to give applicants the opportunity to explore and develop a better understanding of what an off-campus learning experience could feel like for them.

In providing pre-entry guidance to students for blended-learning programmes your role would be similar to the above. You would need to ensure students are clear about which modules are taught through a traditional mode and which are delivered online, and explore any issues they may have about remote learning.

The fundamental principles for pre-entry guidance and admissions apply for work-based learning programmes, although due to the negotiated content of these programmes the implementation of these processes can be very different.

For individuals applying for a work-based learning programme the first step would be for you to arrange a meeting (face to face or virtual). This would enable you and the applicant to explore the learning needs of the candidate, career aspirations, previous experience/qualifications and potential claim for accreditation of prior experiential learning. It would also be important to discuss the level of work-based learning support, either through paid or voluntary work they have access to during the programme. A number of institutions have developed online modules to support this initial process.

For employer-based bespoke work-based programmes you would work collaboratively with the employer to undertake pre-programme guidance and interview applicants. A potential tension that you may have to deal with is where an employee who has been identified by the employer as having the potential to benefit from the programme seems reluctant to participate. These issues are best dealt with openly and sensitively at the interview stage.

Case study 4 is from the Centre of Work Related Studies, at the University of Chester. It demonstrates how staff from the Centre support an individual's claim for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL).

#### Case study 4 – Supporting an APEL claim

Davina is a health service manager who doesn't have any certificated learning although she has considerable experiential learning built up over recent years managing a unit in the local hospital. In consultation with her tutor she was able to identify the following significant areas of learning:

- she had set up a new committee, which she still chairs, into an important new area of working;
- she wrote a comprehensive set of procedures that are still in operation in the unit she manages;
- she investigated the impact of a new piece of government legislation and disseminated her findings on its implications for hospital workers, giving presentations to staff at all levels and in all departments.

Treating these areas of experiential learning as work-based projects she had already completed, she wrote claims (with supporting evidence) for each of these projects to show that she had met the learning outcomes of the Level 4 Negotiated Experiential Learning Module. In consultation with her tutor regarding the amount of work and effort she'd put into these projects, she decided to claim:

- a single module (20 credits) for setting up and chairing the committee;
- a double module (40 credits) for the new procedures, as this was a major piece of work that had probably taken as much as 400 hours of her time in learning the things she needed to;
- a double module (40 credits) for the dissemination project to other staff, another significant piece of work that she estimated was the equivalent of around 400 hours' learning.

When she submitted her prior learning claim with her Self Review & Negotiation of Learning module (20 credits) she hoped to gain 100 credits worth of APEL (20 + 40 + 40) at Level 4, which would have given her enough to complete that level of her degree programme (120 credits in total).

## 2.3. How do I support induction?

There has been considerable research into student transition into higher education and student retention, with induction playing a significant role in supporting that transition.

Although many of the studies relate to full-time undergraduate students, nevertheless there are important generic areas of good practice that can inform the development of induction processes for students on flexible learning programmes. These include the following which were identified by the STAR project (2006)<sup>10</sup>:

- student-centred - cover the areas that students want to know;
- interactive – structure includes student participation rather than them being passive receivers of overwhelming information;
- expectations - clarify your expectations of students while on the programme and what they can expect from you/the programme team and in the case of work-based learning programmes their employer;
- study habits – examine appropriate study habits/techniques relevant to the programme;
- communication – establish good communication between the programme team and students.

The importance of facilitating student engagement in social activities to help them to connect with others is also considered significant, although this may be less of an issue for flexible learning programmes which are delivered off campus. However, it is best not to make this assumption and it is suggested that you test out with students as to how/whether they would like to engage with each other outside the delivery of their programme.

Considering the needs of the mature learner, especially those who are returning to education or where it is their first experience of higher education, is important when constructing an induction programme. This is particularly important for work-based learning programmes where the majority of students will be mature. A number of institutions have developed specific induction activities for mature learners which include the development of skills, eg communication, IT, numeracy and research skills. These have the potential to increase the confidence of adult learners who may feel intimidated by the notion of studying a higher education qualification in the early stages of their programme.

During the induction process it is important that you make students aware of the support they can receive from Central Services, for example Registry, Student Support Services, Library and Learning Resources. Off-campus students need clear guidance on how to access this support.

Induction for work-based learning students should also include the support they can expect to receive from their employer and this is normally through a workplace mentor. It is also good practice to ensure that workplace mentors receive induction so they are clear about their roles too.

For employer-led work-based learning programmes, it is important that any variations on how university policies are implemented are covered in the induction and student handbook. These may include, for example, variations on how the first stage of the process for investigating student complaints is managed.

The norm for online learning programmes is for students to undertake an online induction programme. This may be designed to enable students to navigate at their own pace, although an alternative approach is for tutors to guide students through the programme.

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<sup>10</sup> HEA (year) Student Transition and Retention Project. Available from: [http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/resources/\(E\)%20Supporting%20Students%20-%20Extended%20Induction.pdf](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/resources/(E)%20Supporting%20Students%20-%20Extended%20Induction.pdf) [15 March 2013]

Case study 5 describes how the PG Dip Biomedical Science course team, at the University of Ulster, changed their approach to the induction of distance learning students to improve engagement with the induction process.

#### Case study 5: Induction of distance learning students

As part of the STAR<sup>11</sup> project the PG Dip Biomedical Science course team investigated how they could improve the induction of distance learning students. Their practice was to run a self-directed online induction prior to the start of the course for students to familiarise themselves with the virtual learning environment and provide guidance on good study habits. Students were supported by an online tutorial package and an e-tutor contacted his/her group to brief them on the induction week and signpost them to other tutorial materials. However it was identified that many students were not effectively engaging with the induction materials. Feedback demonstrated that students were reluctant to engage with distance learning material outside the declared teaching period and with 'generic' materials which were not related to their course. The team reviewed their approach and induction is now supplemented with a number of course-specific e-newsletters in advance to introduce students to their course as well as a course-specific online support area. In addition students are assigned in cohorts to subject-specific e-tutors, as well as a dedicated technical support service. This approach has proved to be more effective.

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<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, P, Stephenson, C, and Cook, A. (year) E-tutor Support for Inducting Distance Learning Students.n Available from: [http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/induction/mp\\_uu\\_easystart.pdf](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/induction/mp_uu_easystart.pdf) [25 June 2013].

## 2.4. How do I support student learning?

Where flexible learning programmes include campus-based taught modules, you would use existing teaching and learning practices to support students' learning.

For students on *distance learning/online learning, blended learning* and *work-based learning* programmes there will be different approaches.

The teaching and learning strategy for *distance learning/online learning* and *work-based learning* programmes should have been developed to support remote learners. The practice usually involves developing comprehensive learning resources to support the students' learning. These would either take the form of paper-based resources or online learning resources, both of which would normally build in some element of interactivity for students to check their understanding of the learning material. For students on *blended learning* programmes their mode of learning would include a mix of face-to-face modules and online learning modules.

In order to develop learning resources to support remote learners you would require an appropriate time for development. Institutions have different approaches to providing support to staff in developing these resources in terms of the allocation of time and support. For modules being delivered online the norm is for there to be a collaborative approach between the academic, who develops the content, and the learning technologist, who provides advice/support on how the content could be delivered online. The model of collaborative working between the academic authors and learning technologist will differ from institution to institution.

Due to issues of access, online resources are often predominantly text based, although a greater variety of presentations is gradually developing. If written, it is important that the content is written in an appropriate style; if it is too dry it may make it difficult for the learner to engage. You should consider allowing your personality to come across when authoring material, as it would do if you were delivering the module face to face. You would normally write using the second person 'you', as if you were speaking to the learner directly and personally. Attention to detail and clarity in authoring learning resources are also important; you would need to ensure that you do not leave anything to chance or misinterpretation by the learner. A good starting point is to visualise how students will navigate their way through the module from one recommended source to another, and provide specific guidance on how and when they are required to engage in discussion forums. Your learning technologist should also be able to advise in matters of accessibility for learners with disability. It is now a requirement for learning resources to be designed and constructed in such a way that, for example, all learners including those with disability have equal ease of access.

Monitoring students' engagement with online resources can be quite straightforward as most systems allow you to track how frequently students access the learning resources. Where engagement is a cause of concern you, or where appropriate, colleagues responsible for student support can contact the student to make an appropriate intervention.

The majority of work-based learning programmes are delivered through blended learning. Taught modules may be delivered face to face or online and it may be that some of the content for negotiated modules may be covered through in-company training programmes. Other areas of the negotiated modules may be supported by online learning resources, for example, tutor guided reading. It is important that student support mechanisms maintain student engagement and motivation; these can include regular emails and/or telephone calls to check on their progress. Putting a system in place to monitor student engagement is also helpful as, while it is acknowledged that work-based learners tend to be more mature and self-directed, if they have not been in touch with you for some time, that may indicate they are experiencing difficulties.

As outlined in 2.1 the delivery of negotiated modules may be an emergent process. Supporting students' learning is in many ways similar to supervising the dissertation process or supporting problem-based learning. However, the very nature of work-based learning can lead to unexpected work-related learning opportunities emerging during the process and your role will be to facilitate such developments. In these circumstances you would need to balance how these new learning opportunities could be accommodated at the same time as keeping the project manageable for the learner. For example, a 30 credit negotiated module should have broad equivalency with a 30 credit taught module in terms of students' learning. Consequently it is not unusual for work-based projects to continue after the formal programme has been completed.

Liaison and co-ordination with employer-based mentors is important when supporting the students' learning experience on work-based programmes. In theory the role of the mentor is to help students to identify their learning needs, apply knowledge to practice and act as a resource for individual student's development. The reality may be somewhat different, depending upon the skills and expertise of the mentor. It will be important to assess if students are receiving the agreed level of workplace support, otherwise they may be disadvantaged in fulfilling the requirements of the programme.

## 2.5. Are there any differences in the assessment processes?

In terms of ensuring academic standards, your institution's academic regulations governing the assessment of flexible learning programmes will be the same as for traditional programmes. However, there may be some differences in how the assessment processes are implemented and administered.

In the case of accelerated learning programmes it is anticipated that there are no differences to the way in which the modules are assessed, especially where the programme includes existing modules from a similar programme which has been designed for traditional delivery. There may be some concerns about the volume and intensity of the assessment diet for students, but this is the nature of the two-year programme and an area that needs to be explored with the student prior to admission.

Similarly it is anticipated that there would be few differences in administering the assessment process for accelerated learning programmes. The intensive delivery of these programmes and delivery across the academic year may require additional assessment boards to progress students from one stage of the programme to the next. The need for more boards may depend on your institution's regulations on progression.

Case study 6 is from Staffordshire University which offers a range of fast-track degrees and accelerated undergraduate programmes. This illustrates their approach to programme design and findings regarding students' performance.

### Case study 6: Staffordshire University - two-year fast-track degrees

Staffordshire University has been running two-year fast-track degrees since 2006. In fast-track mode programmes run over two years with three teaching blocks in each year (180 credits a year). Current programmes are mainly vocational (for example, Business Management, Accounting and Finance, Law) and in terms of student profile a significant proportion are mature students, either career changers or late entrants into HE. The benefits of fast-track study for students include entering the job market a year earlier than their peers and achieving a Masters or professional qualification in three years rather than four. There may also be financial benefits for students and living costs can be reduced by up to a third in comparison with standard three-year degrees. However, it is not an easy option and to succeed students need to be committed and motivated. In a study carried out at Staffordshire University fast-track students consistently achieved higher module marks compared with three-year students on the same modules.

For distance learning/online learning programmes a key area of difference in managing assessment is where the assessment method of modules is through examination. Administering the examination process for remote learners can be challenging, as the institution needs to ensure the confidentiality of the examination paper, across different locations and time zones and make provision for checking the identity of students undertaking the examination.

The strategies you could consider for achieving this can include sourcing third-party institutions to provide examination centres. This would require the institution undertaking due diligence processes for each examination centre and providing the centres with substantial guidance in the quality management processes for the administration of examinations.

The experience from the University of London in managing its international programmes, which can be accessed globally through its network of affiliate centres and registered centres, demonstrates that these challenges can be effectively managed. However, this is an example of an organisation with extensive experience in distance learning, which has been developed over many years, and which has developed its infrastructure to support these developments.

There are ways of overcoming the challenge of managing examinations for online learning modules. However, where your programme has professional body accreditation you would need to ensure that any changes to the assessment strategy are in line with their requirements. Rather than use a closed-book examination for example, you could consider an open-book time-constrained assessment as a valid and reliable alternative method. However, this could be an area of contention among those academics wedded to the practice of closed-book examinations. They may view alternative assessment methods as being less rigorous. You would also need to consider the views of the external examiner in changing the module assessment and demonstrate that the alternative method is equally robust and relevant in assessing the learning outcomes of the module to gain their approval.

With regard to the submission of coursework for online programmes, the norm would be for students to submit electronically through the platform. Depending upon your institution's policy it may come down to individual choice whether you assess online or print them. Whichever method you use to mark, students would expect their feedback to be given online. How the samples of work are sent to the external examiners for moderation will depend upon the policies in place, although it is the practice for some institutions to provide the external examiners with full access to the online modules in which event they could access samples of assessment online.

Where the assessment processes for work-based learning can differ from traditional programmes is the role of the workplace mentor and managing the assessment of APEL.

The assessment methodology for work-based learning should relate to the workplace and enable the student to reflect and demonstrate their learning in a work-based context. As assessment is integral to the learning process, it is important that relevant learning outcomes are developed which allow for formative as well as summative assessment. Where a workplace mentor has been identified to support the student they should be providing continuous and developmental formative feedback. It is therefore important that you ensure the mentor is fully briefed, that there is effective communication between you and the mentor, and that they fully understand their role in the assessment process.

In managing the assessment of APEL it is important for you to ensure that the required academic standards are being met. An APEL claim has the same status as other forms of assessment within the institution and the process for managing the assessment needs to be equally robust. The evidence to support an APEL claim is usually captured in a portfolio which could include reports, essays, interviews, workplace documents and observation. It has been observed that the use of the word portfolio can be off putting and indicate a level of evidence that is out of scope with the volume of credit being claimed. It can also lead to the student focusing on gathering the evidence rather than reflecting on the learning that has taken place.

The most important aspect of an APEL claim is the student reflection and demonstration of the learning from the experience; academic credit is being awarded for the learning not the experience. In their reflective commentary the student needs to demonstrate that the learning is equivalent to the level and volume of credit of their claim.

For employer-responsive provision there is an increasing practice in using cohort APEL for assessing and recognising experiential learning for a group of employees with a common core of experience. Where this is the case it is usual to have a common assessment which can be used them all.

In negotiating the programme of work-based learning you would have established whether to map the learning from APEL to specific credit or general credit. Therefore in assessing the APEL claim you will be using either specific assessment criteria related to the learning outcomes of a module or generic assessment criteria related to the level of credit being awarded. It is established practice to mark APEL submissions on a pass or fail basis, and a process for resubmission needs to be in place where a claim for APEL is failed.

APEL claims may be submitted for consideration/approval by the relevant Programme Assessment Board or where the volume and scale is significant some institutions use APEL Assessment Boards and APEL External Examiners.

## 2.6. What is the role of the external examiner?

External examiners play a key role in ensuring the quality and standards of an institution's awards; their key functions are to ensure that the standards of the institution are maintained and students are treated fairly in the assessment process. They are also a source of expertise in providing advice on any proposed changes to the content, structure and regulations of a programme during its period of approval, and it is normal practice for external examiners to approve such changes. It is also standard practice for external examiners' reports to be an integral part of the institution's quality monitoring and review processes.

For flexible learning programmes, where possible, it is useful for you to appoint external examiners with relevant experience in the type of programme being delivered in addition to subject expertise. For example you may appoint external examiners with substantial experience of higher education, professional experience and industry.

As identified in 1.2 where you are developing a route for accelerated learning, blended learning or online distance learning to an existing programme you should consult with the external examiners and take account of their views and guidance during the development process.

It is usual for work-based learning programmes to appoint subject specialist external examiners as well as external examiner(s) who have experience in work-based learning and trans-disciplinary programmes. For those institutions that have introduced streamlined processes for the approval of new pathways on work-based learning programmes or short awards for the accreditation of in-company training, the external examiners will normally be members of the standing panel for approval.

In terms of quality and standards, where the programme is delivered through a traditional route as well as a flexible learning route, the external examiners will look at performance across the different cohorts and, should there be any wide differences in student achievement from one mode to another, will ask the programme team to address such issues through their annual quality monitoring processes.

It is good practice to ensure external examiners are inducted at the programme level as well as institutional level in order for them to gain an understanding of the institution, its mission and the overall context in which the programme is developed and delivered.

## **2.7. What is my role in providing information on post-programme opportunities?**

Depending on the nature of the programme it is usual for post-programme opportunities, in terms of both further engagements in higher education and/or employment opportunities, to be addressed during the delivery of the programme through student interaction with the institution's Careers Centre.

Where you have developed a close working relationship with students, they will frequently use you as a sounding board and source of informal advice. For students who have, for example, engaged in smaller awards through work-based learning, it may increase their appetite for further learning opportunities. Your role would be to guide them through the various options for progressing to another qualification that would meet their career and personal development aspirations.

## Section 3 – Additional information and resources

- 1** Outram, S. (2011) Final evaluation of the HEFCE-funded Flexible Learning Pathfinder projects. Higher Education Academy: York. Available from: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/flexiblelearning/Pathfinder\\_2011\\_AW\\_2\\_281111\\_1614.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/flexiblelearning/Pathfinder_2011_AW_2_281111_1614.pdf). This link provides context and background to the development of flexible learning and evaluates the outcomes from the HEFCE-funded Flexible Learning Pathfinder projects.
- 2** Tallantyre, F., Kettle, J. and Smith, J. (2010) Quality and Responding to employer needs. Higher Education Academy: York. Available from: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/employability/employerengagement/DemonstratorProjects.pdf>. This link takes you to nine demonstrator projects of good practice in HE providers in the context of employer responsive provision covering:
  - accreditation of prior experiential learning;
  - accreditation of company-based training;
  - determining credit volumes for negotiated learning;
  - managing employer and cross-institutional partnerships;
  - rapid response and fit-for-purpose solutions for employer responsive provision;
  - supporting academic staff who contribute to the mentoring process within work-based academic awards;
  - designing, accrediting and assuring bite-size provision;
  - assessment of employer responsive provision.
- 3** QAA Scotland (2010) Making it Work a guidebook exploring work-based learning. Available from: [http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/WBL\\_Guidelines.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/WBL_Guidelines.pdf). The guidebook comprises information, ideas, case studies and tools to support the development of work-based learning.
- 4** Employer Based Training Accreditation (EBTA) <http://ebta.qaa.ac.uk/>. This link provides case studies citing examples of university/employer partnerships. Over 30 higher education institutions are members of EBTA.
- 5** JISC (2011) Transforming Curriculum Delivery through Technology: Stories of challenges, benefits and change. Available from: [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/curriculumdelivery/Transforming%20curriculum%20delivery\\_accessible2.pdf](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/curriculumdelivery/Transforming%20curriculum%20delivery_accessible2.pdf). This link provides examples and benefits of technology-enhanced delivery for learners, practitioners and institutions.
- 6** The Design Studio. Available from: <http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/12458422/Welcome%20to%20the%20Design%20Studio>. This is a dynamic wiki-based toolkit which draws together a range of emerging and existing resources into the effective use of technology in curriculum design and delivery processes; it is under continuous development.
- 7** McCaig, C., Bowers-Brown, T. and Drew, S. (2007) Accelerated Learning Programmes: a review of quality, extent and demand. Centre for Research and Evaluation, Sheffield Hallam University. Higher Education Academy: York. Available from: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/Accelerated\\_learning\\_programmes\\_1.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/Accelerated_learning_programmes_1.pdf). This link provides background to the development of two-year accelerated undergraduate degrees.

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