Blended/distance learning guidance

Centres must ensure they hold approval from YMCA Awards to deliver blended/distance learning programmes. If not, approval must be applied for and issued by YMCA Awards prior to the commencement of any blended learning programmes. Failure to do so may incur a sanction and/or fine from YMCA Awards.

For all blended learning approval applications YMCA Awards require the centre to complete a Course Outline. A Scheme of Work must be available for External Quality Assurance visits.

An ideal blended/distance learning programme will be one that balances:
- the freedom of remote access, with
- tried and tested quality assurance strategies used in traditional learning situations

Planning for blended/distance learning

Blended/distance learning will present more challenges than conventional delivery modes because centres need to provide:
- adequate resources, time and communication channels
- appropriate, workable and cost effective arrangements
- adequate learner support – for example, additional consideration should be considered for those learners in geographically isolated locations
- effective quality assurance – to prove authenticity of a learner's work
- security of ICT support – which may be open to plagiarism or impersonation

A blended/distance learning programme should include:

- initial assessment to ensure that the programme and mode of delivery is appropriate to the needs of the learner
- induction
- learning and assessment materials
- specialist tutor support
- technician support
- counselling and guidance
- access to additional learning support
- clear identification of delivery method in the programme literature and the learning agreement
- some pre-assessment contact time with a qualified assessor

Learners have a right to access:

- regular support and guidance from a support contact (can include telephone/email/Skype)
- guidance on staff availability/response times and expectations
- learning and assessment materials
- equipment and resources
- assessment opportunities
- opportunities for interaction with their peers

A centre must be confident that:

- learners have opportunities for internal, external and re-assessment
- learners submit their own work for internal or external assessment
- all human resources working on blended/distance learning programmes should be appropriately qualified, trained and supported in their role

Guidelines for planning and programming

YMCA Awards suggest that centres consider all of the following:

- individual learner situations and requirements for flexible delivery
- drawing up individual learning and assessment contracts
- specifying the time allowed to cover the programme content
- specifying the time allowed for any internal or external assessments
- defining rules which apply to extension of timescales indicated
- defining the provision of any eLearning which is available
- defining the resources and/or equipment available to the learner
- defining arrangements for any practical activities that may need to be carried out and the process by which evidence must be generated
- ensuring that all assessment tools and distance learning evidence are internally quality assured

Learner support and communication

The level of support required during a blended/distance learning programme will vary between learners. It is important to allocate sufficient time to support all learners whether self-sufficient or otherwise.

Communication

Centres should be in regular, scheduled contact with all learners undertaking a blended/distance learning course.

The following strategies offer general guidelines to blended/distance learning communication:

- allocate sufficient learner support contacts to guarantee appropriate support. The ratio of learner support contacts to learners will vary from programme to programme and will depend on support mechanisms
- establish the support mechanisms to be used – telephone, face to face tutorials, e-mail, Skype etc.
- establish the extent of the availability of all support mechanisms and whether there are specific time restrictions (for example, specific days of week)
- define how the support will be managed, who will do it and how communication will be facilitated by the centre to offer learner support

Guidance for direct contact hours

A centre must provide the relevant amount of face to face teaching to ensure that learners have the best opportunity to succeed in the unit or qualification undertaken.

YMCA Awards will sample learners work during the course and assessment to monitor whether they have been given the best opportunity to pass.

Assessment for blended/distance learning

Assessment of blended/distance learning programmes must be valid and reliable

Validity

The tools of assessment used for blended/distance learning programmes must be fit for purpose and:

- contain clearly defined criteria
- ensure coverage of the skills and knowledge defined in the unit/qualification
- be capable of generating appropriate evidence for the unit outcomes to be assessed

Reliability

It is important that the units and/or qualifications offered by blended/distance learning are as visibly reliable as those offered by face to face learning. Reliable assessment decisions must be:

- based on evidence generated by valid assessment tools that are consistently applied over time
- across a range of learners in different situations and contexts
- subject to internal quality assurance monitoring to ensure comparability and credibility

Quality assurance for blended/distance learning

YMCA Awards will expect to see quality assurance systems adapted appropriately to encompass arrangements for units and qualifications offered by this learning route.

Internal Quality Assurance of blended/distance learning

A centre's approach to internal quality assurance should include the following:

- appointing a key individual to act as IQA for the blended/distance learning programme
- subjecting assessment and learning materials to internal checking prior to use
- documenting the roles and responsibilities for all those involved in the blended/distance learning process
- recording and monitoring the support and communication offered to learners
- monitoring the consistency of any assessments carried out for blended/distance learning learners
- sampling learner evidence generated by blended/distance learning programmes
- evaluating arrangements for delivery of blended/distance learning programmes
- design and management of blended/distance learning programmes