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Introduction

Union College is committed to excellence in programme delivery, including online delivery. The College regards its online degree provision as being of equal quality, in terms of teaching methods and scholarly rigour, as its other more traditional programmes. The online programmes provide opportunities for postgraduate education which are flexible, accessible and appropriate to the digital age. This flexibility is of vital importance in providing opportunities for ministerial development. These programmes have also been designed to allow the College to serve students without geographical restriction, particularly those from overseas contexts that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland has links to through its Council for Global Mission.

The policy document outlines the minimum requirements that the College expects of its online provision.

Key principles

The College must ensure that it maintains academic standards with respect to all its programmes.

Online programmes should widen learning opportunities whilst maintaining both the standard of the award being sought and the quality of the support that is offered to students.

The quality assurance processes for programmes involving alternative forms of delivery should be as rigorous as for those employing conventional modes of teaching and learning. All Union College students studying online or on campus share the same status.

Academic standards

The College is responsible for ensuring that the quality of the learning experience provided in the online programmes is adequate to achieve the academic standards required for each postgraduate award. These responsibilities include making the arrangements for satisfactory delivery of the curriculum, appropriate student support, and equitable assessment of students.[1]

All new online programmes and modules must be approved through the PTFI's approval process.

The College's online programmes are subject to annual monitoring. There should be a particular focus on highlighting any problems and explaining how issues raised by student feedback are being addressed.

The online programmes must meet the academic standards set out in the FHEQ in order that students, employers, stakeholders and the public have confidence that the award or qualification is of a standard recognised and accepted in the UK.

A programme specification is provided for every programme regardless of mode of delivery and, where relevant, this should refer to subject benchmark statements. This document will describe the aims, intended learning outcomes, learning and teaching methods, and assessment procedures.

Admissions

The College will ensure that all selection decisions are made on the basis of merit and the ability of each applicant to meet the academic and non-academic criteria for admission to the relevant programme of study.[2]

Potential applicants are encouraged to request information through the website and the College's use of the Trello workflow application ensures that there is effective ongoing and personalised support for prospective students at all stages of the admissions process.
If the applicant meets the College's required criteria they will be invited to supply the necessary supporting documentation via a secure file upload.

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[1] For more details, please see the College's Assessment Policy.
[2] For more details, please see the College's Admissions Policy.

Each programme has up to three entry points per year and a College representative will offer guidance on potential degree pathways.

The typical entrance requirement for the College's online PGT programmes is a 2.1 honours degree or above, or equivalent qualification acceptable to PTFI. Some programmes may have more specific requirements e.g. the PGT programmes in Reformed Theology. For overseas students, normally the equivalent of a 2.1 honours degree is taken to be a Cumulative Grade Point Average of 3.3 or higher from an accredited institution.

Applicants whose first language is not English must normally have one of the following qualifications as evidence of their English language ability:
- An undergraduate or master's degree that was taught and assessed in English in a majority English-speaking country as defined by UK Visas and Immigration
- International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic module (not General Training): overall score of 7.0 with at least 6.5 in each category (this is the College's preferred test)
- Pearson Test of English, Academic: PTE(A) total 67 (at least 61 in each of the 'communicative skills' sections)
- Cambridge Proficiency (CPE) or Cambridge Advanced (CAE): total 186 (at least 176 in each module)

For those whose first language is not English, the following normally apply:
- Degrees taught and assessed in English must be no more than three years old at the beginning of the applicant's degree programme.
- Language tests must be no more than two years old at the beginning of the applicant's degree programme.

The application deadline is 31 days prior to the course start date but the College recommends that applications be submitted as soon as possible.

To complete the application process, prospective students are required to upload the following portfolio as proof that they meet the entrance requirements for the programme:
- Curriculum vitae
- Sample of academic work (ideally a piece of around 2,000 words which was submitted for a recent qualification)
- Letter of intent (300-400 words providing a personal statement of motivation for applying for the particular programme)
- Two signed letters of reference in support of the application (at least one of these must be an academic reference)
- Verified academic transcript(s) and a copy (or copies) of degree certifications (If these documents are not in English an official English translation must be supplied with full contact details of either the professional translator, the institution that issued the transcript or the authorised notary).

- A document confirming the identity of the applicant (a copy of the photo page of a valid passport is the preferred option)
- A non-returnable application fee set by College on an annual basis.

Applications are assessed by at least two members of academic staff. Academic grades form only one part of the final decision. Applicants must demonstrate that they have the skills, knowledge, and attributes that will enable them to become successful students in the online programmes. All applications will be considered in line with the procedures of the College's Admissions Policy. Full details of the complaints procedure can be found in the College's Admissions Policy.

The College welcomes applications from disabled people and believes that online delivery may help to remove barriers which prevent disabled students from otherwise participating in programmes of study. The College will always aim to make reasonable adjustments for disabled applicants. Applicants are invited to make the College aware of their disability status during the application process.

Offers are made on the basis of merit and the ability of each applicant to meet the academic and non-academic criteria for admission to the relevant programme of study. Offers are made based on the information supplied on the application form and the submission of all other required documents.

Delivery

The College will ensure that the delivery of online programmes is appropriately secure in order to safeguard the College's programmes and to identify the individuals who use them.

All students are provided with the programme specification and the College handbook.

Prospective students will be given clear and realistic details about the expectations of the workload for all programmes and about the nature and extent of the autonomous and supported aspects of online learning.

The courses are delivered through a virtual learning environment (VLE) that include typical VLE features (discussion forums, reflective exercises et al.) and a number of innovative features. These include high quality curricula particularly designed for the online delivery (for example, featuring shorter more frequent video segments) and extensive use of the industry leading Cerego memory enhancement software. The use of these resources demonstrates the College's commitment to quality, both in content and presentation. The

implementation of Cerego in one of the College's QUB modules underlines its value as a resource.[3]

A curated catalogue of online resources is provided within the VLE. All online students are also members of the Gamble Library at UTC. Tutors are able to provide additional scanned resources within the VLE, in line with licensing requirements and e-books are also available through the Gamble Library. Finally, the college provides extensive guidance for online students in accessing free online resources e.g. the Post-Reformation Digital Library.

The College will ensure that all Faculty involved in the delivery of online programmes are appropriately qualified and are provided with the necessary training to enable them to teach effectively in the digital space.

The College will ensure that the platform provider has contingency plans would come into operation in the event of the failure of the designed modes of delivery.

In the case of student complaints, appeals and misconduct the policies and procedures for online programmes are identical to those for the College's traditional programmes.

Learner support

The model of online education adopted by the college seeks to strengthen the connection between tutor and student and between students. Each student is assigned a dedicated personal academic tutor and the College aims to provide each online student with access to a personal tutor that at least equals or exceeds the level offered by campus education. The tutor guides the student through the orientation process and provides constructive feedback on academic performance and authoritative guidance on academic progression. This is facilitated by email, telephone or video-conferencing.

New students are provided with orientation and support for working in a digital environment and full technical support is available through the platform provider.

Students are made aware of the resources available to support their study and about the availability of their tutor. The programme style guide with subject-specific guidance on conventions of style, presentation, and referencing is included in the module documents within each module on the platform. The Gamble Library also provides orientation and advice, primarily about the resources which are available remotely (and also locally).

Student responsibility is emphasised in terms of requesting information and advice and for participation in the individual and group activities which will facilitate learning in the digital space. In order to enhance the student voice, students are encouraged to make use of the

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[3] The VLE also provides a secure location to host grades and student academic records.

relevant discussion board in order to ask questions or raise issues and are assured that these will be responded to in a prompt manner.

In order to ensure that online students are successfully engaging with the VLE there is enhanced monitoring of new students during the first two weeks of the programme reviewing key indicators from the analytics about engagement with the learning resources on the platform. It is important that students understand the role of data analytics for the overall programme delivery and for student support during the initial period of each module. Therefore, during programme and module orientation the role of data analytics is clearly explained to students.

The College is committed to layering appropriate enhancements across online programmes to encourage student participation and to motivate student achievement. These enhancements include virtual café conversations with the programme convener(s) and tutors which facilitate student conversation about the programme, the specific learning items, the assessments, and next steps after study. This social presence from academic staff among the students is important for student formation in addition to formal learning. While the college recognises that discussion forums within the modules should facilitate student conversations, it is also important to provide an appropriate environment for more informal conversations including academic staff. The College uses video conferencing to facilitate these events.

Regular Expectations and Responsibilities for communication

1. Weekly communication (at least)—via email or the VLE
   a. Personalised when possible
   b. Including:
      i. Awareness of where student is in the course
      ii. Expectations for what is upcoming in the course
      iii. Encouragement regarding progress
2. 48-hour email response time to student emails (Mon-Fri)
3. Pro-active engagement in online forums e.g. tips for study and recommended helps and material
4. Live Events
   a. Availability for live dialogue; can be communal or individual
   b. At least once per month (if desired by the student)
   c. Not to exceed once per week, unless desired by the coordinator.

Wherever possible, modules should include opportunities for collaborative learning since this enhances student support.

Tutor response times should be established in order to manage student expectations.

Tutors and programme conveners will be supplied with learning analytics from the VLE in order to track and assess the progress of students and identify those students in need of support and intervention. This is intended to enable facilitate student completion.

Student voice

In order to enhance the new online programmes, students are provided with formal opportunities to feed back on their experience of the online programmes. Module evaluation questionnaires will be supplied to enable students to reflect upon the quality of online learning resources, assessment, support and their personal development. These student responses are considered in module and programme review.

Informal feedback is also encouraged on a regular basis. The module announcement discussion forum within each module is used to actively encourage learners to engage. Students are informed of any actions taken as a result of their feedback e.g. enhancements to assessment, scheduling, approaches to teaching and learning, and to the availability of resources.

In order to enhance the student voice thereby increasing learner participation in consultation, a student representative from the online programmes participates in the College's General Student Council and online students are included in relevant internal College surveys.

Assessment

The College will ensure that the outcomes of assessment for online programmes conform to FHEQ standards and to the relevant subject benchmark statement. The assessment for the online programmes is aligned with the PTFI's Assessment Policy and is formulated, approved, marked and moderated according to the same standards used for traditional programmes. Assessment is designed with the security issues relating to student authentication in mind e.g. multiple assessments per module, group assessments, and regular online discussion.

At the beginning of each module, students receive full details of the assessment elements, marking criteria and relative weighting of elements. These details are contained within the easily accessible module document. Particular guidance is given to submission dates in order to help students plan their workload.

Students receive timely feedback and guidance on formative assessment elements in order to have realistic expectations of performance in summative assessment. In the online programmes, discussion forums and the Cerego learning app provide formative feedback.

Students are made aware of the Academic Integrity Policy which is provided in each module's resources.[4]

Complaints

The College's complaints and grievance procedures are outlined in the College Handbook which is linked to via the VLE. In the first instance a student should approach their tutor. If however the complaint is about the tutor the student should instead address it to the relevant Head of Department.

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[4] Academic Integrity Policy for PTFI Online Programmes: Understanding What is Required in Academic Assessments.