

# Heriot-Watt University

## Policy on Block Teaching

### Introduction

The conventional approach to the delivery of a full-time course of study comprises 15 weeks of student learning and assessment, with students studying for 4 courses at any one time. Teaching activities are uniformly spread throughout the first 12 weeks, typically with 3 or 4 hours of staff/student contact per week (average 3 for management subjects and 4 for science and engineering subjects). Assessment is undertaken after 12 weeks of learning. This is defined in this policy as “conventional teaching” or “conventional learning”.

Block teaching is a style of teaching where lectures, tutorials and other forms of teaching are provided in an intensive block, sometimes as short as 1 week and student learning is compressed, typically with students studying only one course at a time.

In this policy, block teaching refers to any teaching arrangement where the teaching is spread over a period of 6 weeks or less. This policy differentiates between two forms of block teaching:

**Category 1: A ‘true’ block teaching model, reflecting tested and preferred pedagogies and appropriate to the student profile, with the teaching forming an integrated element of a wider learning strategy enabling students to complete the required learning for a course (Subject to approval of the Studies Committees as part of the standard approval of a new programme.)**

*This category includes all EBS provision and certain categories of PGT provision at the Dubai and Malaysia Campuses. EGIS has, for over 25 years, delivered an interdisciplinary project with students from many disciplines and this can only be delivered if all the students spend an intensive week of study at the same time. Industrial-based projects may require the student to be working full-time in a company for the period of the placement. Therefore, in principle, there may be sound pedagogic reasons for the teaching and/or learning arrangements other than the conventional format.*

**Category 2: ‘Conversion’ of an on-campus delivery model, adapted for another environment (in-company training programmes; another campus), subject to approval prior to implementation.**

The second category applies to those cases where a course has been designed for delivery by conventional methods but, for particular reasons, is being delivered as a block to students. In the initial phase of the Dubai Campus, there had been several examples of this practice, particularly where staff had flown from the UK to deliver teaching. Student feedback had consistently shown that students did not like this approach, particularly where there might have been 5 days of continuous lectures followed by 5 to 10 days of self-study. The cycle might then have been repeated. Exams were either held at the end of the teaching block or at the end of the semester in the normal assessment period.

The issues most often raised by students were:

1. A course typically has 36-48 contact hours and this is often compressed into a single week. Lecturers who are only on campus for a finite time routinely run out of time at the end of the period and leave students to self-study the remainder. The pressure of time often leads to insufficient opportunity for responding to questions.
2. It is almost impossible for a single lecturer to deliver the quality of teaching expected for such a sustained period. Both staff and students get tired, and there is little learning by the students at the end of a full day.
3. The teaching staff are often only on the campus for the period of teaching and students have no one to go to for advice after the teaching.
4. Students who are not able to attend the University for short periods can miss disproportionately large amounts of contact time.

5. There is usually no opportunity for students to be given feedback on their learning during the teaching period.

Following discussion at the then Quality and Standards Committee (the University Committee for Quality and Standards from 1 August 2017), it was agreed that the University should have a formal policy to cover courses where the conventional mode of delivery has been adapted for block teaching to ensure that students receive an appropriate learning and teaching experience, and that the University has proper oversight of the methods of teaching.

The following policy, and the accompanying implementation plans and guidelines, are designed to apply to Category 2 types of block teaching, namely where block teaching has been introduced to replace a “conventional” on-campus format for primarily practical purposes<sup>1</sup>.

In addition to the policy itself, sections on “implementation” and “guidelines” have been included.

## Policy

1. Any course that is to be delivered as a block must be approved by the Studies Committee. The case to the Studies Committee should explain
  - i. why the block approach is being taken
  - ii. how the course has been designed to allow the students to study using this approach, including periods of learning before and after the block of teaching
  - iii. the support that will be provided if the staff are not on campus for the full semester, including the use of the VLE
  - iv. the nature and timing of the assessment activities.
2. Courses delivered by conventional methods at the UK campuses which are intended to be delivered at another location by block methods must be approved by the Studies Committee and the differences in the course design must be explained. The proposal must address the issues in point 1.
3. Where block teaching is adopted for only part of the programme, then the blocks should, wherever possible, be at the start of the semester so that students have time to contact staff before the assessment.
4. The assessment period should be at the end of the semester, even if the teaching activities are delivered as blocks. Any change in assessment timings requires approval from the Studies Committee.
5. Courses delivered by conventional methods on one campus and as a block in another location should follow the guidelines set out below.

In cases where block teaching has to be used as an emergency measure, for example, there is an urgent need to cover for staff illness, then Schools should ensure that the students are properly supported as outlined in the guidelines below and the relevant Dean of the University should be informed.

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<sup>1</sup> For Category 1 cases, the “true” block teaching model, where a course has been designed and developed specifically around this method of delivery for pedagogic reasons and reflects differences in the profile and needs of students, proposals still require approval of the appropriate Studies Committees. Category 1 proposals should address the four areas (i-iv) in bullet point 1 of the Policy.

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## Implementation

This policy was implemented for all new and existing programmes from 2012/13.

### Guidelines for Course design

These guidelines apply when courses with the normal 36-48 hours of contact are delivered in another location as a block, ie the Category 2 “conversion” model of block teaching. Typically, there will be a block of time for teaching followed by a block of time for independent student learning. The Learning and Teaching Academy and Learning and Teaching Enhancement Services can advise and support Schools in offering block teaching to ensure that students are provided with an appropriate learning experience.

1. It is recommended that formal teaching should not normally exceed 6 hours in any one day and should not normally exceed 25 hours in any one 5 day period. Proposals to exceed this recommended minimum should be considered by the Studies Committee.
2. Formal teaching periods should include specific sessions for students to consolidate their learning and ask questions.
3. No member of staff should deliver more than 25 hours as one block of teaching in any one 5 day period.
4. Students should have a member of staff available (in person), particularly during the period immediately following the teaching block, who is able to answer to answer academic and generic questions related to the course during the independent study period. Email contact is not sufficient.
5. Course design must be structured in such a way as to allow students the 150 hours of learning associated with each course.
6. There should be structured learning before the teaching block so that students are prepared for the intensive teaching and structured learning activities after the teaching block where students can test their understanding.
7. The block teaching sessions should include problem-based learning sessions where students have an opportunity to reflect on their learning.
8. As per the University requirements for all courses, block teaching courses should also incorporate the following:
  - Formative assessment during the course
  - Informative feedback during the course
  - Provision of learning support during the assessment period
  - Skills development
  - Minimum presence on VISION (see *Curriculum Structure Guidelines for list*)

In addition to the requirements under point 1 of the Policy, the proposal made to the Studies Committee must address the above eight points, so that it is clear how the “150 hours of learning” for each course are accommodated and how the proposal meets the specified guidelines. If the block teaching proposal requires a staff member to travel to deliver the taught part of a course, the case being made to the Studies Committee must provide specific details of how support is provided locally to address points 4 and 6.

POLICY