



Title of Report: Distance Learning at Aston University

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1. Identify and describe the Professional Development Opportunity (PDO).

Aston University is a small, research-led university in Birmingham, UK. We offer the following post-graduate programs by online learning:

Taught programs:

- Certificate in Advanced Studies in ELT;
- MSc in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL);
- MSc in Teaching English for Specific Purposes (TESP);
- MSc in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL);
- MSc in Educational Management in TESOL (EMT);
- MSc in Applied Linguistics;
- MSc in Forensic Linguistics.

Research programs:

- MPhil/PhD Applied Linguistics.

Aston has been running distance learning programs in TESOL for 30 years. During this time, other programs have been added and we now also offer programs in Forensic Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. Three years ago, we added the first (we think) PhD in Applied Linguistics, purely by distance learning. Fourteen tutors are currently involved as tutors on distance learning programs. We are supported by three administrators in different roles. Our programs focus on post-graduate study, and our courses attract course participants from around the world. At present we have large cohorts in Japan, the Gulf States, and Turkey.

2. Describe the target audience for the PDO.

The Certificate in Advanced Studies in TESOL is targeted at those who have some teaching experience but want a university qualification or want to prepare for a Master's program in TESOL. MSc programs in TESOL/TESP/TEYL/EMT are targeted at those who have at least two years' teaching experience and usually a first degree. Teachers of all levels and all ages, teacher trainers, and managers of teaching centers enroll in the programs.

Course participants are generally mature. Most are over 30 years old. They come from all over the world, but mostly from countries where English is taught as a foreign language.

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Course participants choose an online program because most are working and want to continue to do so. Many have families and are unable to spend long periods of time away from their country of residence. There are about 150 course participants currently enrolled in the distance learning programs.

3. Describe how you recruit course participants for your PDO.

Most of our course participants find out about us through word-of-mouth: we have an international reputation and numerous, knowledgeable, supportive, and enthusiastic alumni.

Currently we do not advertise in print media or on websites. We have found that these are expensive and do not yield a strong return. We do attend international conferences, however, and sometimes take a publisher's stand. We have a brochure that we distribute at these events and we focus at all times on the academic rigor and professional development opportunities of our programs. Most of our course participants find out about us through word-of-mouth recommendations and through internet searches.

4. Describe the curriculum choices made.

Online delivery at the master's level was originally chosen because we recognized that not all teachers who want a post-graduate qualification are able to dedicate a year's full-time study (or two years' part-time study) to its pursuit. As the original programs were developed many years ago, we do not have information about the experience of tutors at the time. However, a large number of the tutors currently working on the program were, at one time, also course participants. They know the issues and challenges that course participants studying at a distance encounter, and this knowledge and understanding has helped to develop the programs effectively.

Recently, the PhD was added to our online suite. This decision was premised on the same understanding of the reality of teachers' working lives. Tutors bring their experience of tutoring at master's level to tutoring at PhD level and a recent review of the program commended their dedication, professionalism, and supportive feedback.

Staff/student ratios are determined within the School, with teaching staff attracting workload points for each online student they teach. This system means that teaching staff do not become overloaded.

5. Explain the PDO's over-arching goals and specific objectives.

TESOL professionals are required to be flexible and adaptable. No context is alike and so it is important that master's courses prepare participants to be successful in whatever learning and teaching context they find themselves. The best way to do so, we believe, is through course participants exploring and researching the classrooms and institutions in which they work. Our approach to postgraduate study and academic development is that of situated learning, which recognizes the importance of the local context and students' experience of it. We provide students with the knowledge and research tools to theorize from practice through a series of precisely focused investigations that are directly relevant to their own situations. This approach is emancipatory, ensuring that graduates of TESOL programs are autonomous, knowledgeable, and highly skilled professionals.

The overall aim of the MSc programs in TESOL/TESP/TEYL/EMT is to provide an up-to-date framework, based on linguistic, social, and intercultural awareness, for developing



and extending students' professional expertise. Each program is both academically rigorous and professionally rewarding. Specifically, they aim to:

- (1) deepen students' knowledge of key issues in the interdisciplinary field of TESOL/TEFL/TEYL/EMT;
- (2) enhance students' knowledge of a range of research methods and techniques relevant to their academic and professional development;
- (3) enable students to make informed, context-sensitive decisions on any aspect of TESOL/TEFL/TEYL/EMT;
- (4) support the development of the reflective practitioner through a working integration of theory and practice; and
- (5) provide students with an enjoyable, coherent, and professionally worthwhile learning experience in its own right.

The PhD in Applied Linguistics aims to develop course participants':

- (1) knowledge of key issues at the forefront of the interdisciplinary field of applied linguistics;
- (2) enhance their knowledge of a range of research traditions, methods, and techniques relevant to academic and professional development;
- (3) ability to design and implement a research project that makes an original contribution to the field of applied linguistics in terms of new knowledge, applications, or understanding;
- (4) learning, personal development, and self-awareness; and
- (5) capacity for reflective, critical, and independent thought and action in relation to the area of study.

PhD study requires participants to work and to research independently. Our program ensures that participants are provided with the tools they need to do this at a distance.

6. Describe the teaching and learning activities used in the PDO and what online applications are used to support these activities.

Online applications used are Blackboard (a Learning Management System/LMS) and Skype. All material is delivered via Blackboard. These materials include:

- (1) text-based materials with a variety of task-types such as reflective tasks, reading and summarizing, and knowledge testing;
- (2) recorded lectures (For mainly text-based modules, these lectures are introductory talks. Input for other modules is entirely by recorded lecture.);
- (3) online discussion boards (asynchronous);
- (4) optional online study groups (asynchronous);
- (5) group Skype tutorials (synchronous); and
- (6) assessed small-scale research projects in which participants investigate their local contexts.

Students are provided with formative feedback on proposals for their research projects and on a section of the assignment before submission. Both summative and formative feedback is given on assignments submitted, either in the form of audio-recorded feedback or detailed comments on their written work.



The use of the LMS enables quick, easy, and efficient delivery of materials to all students. All forms of interaction are optional for students and use of both asynchronous and synchronous mechanisms allow for maximum participation. The research projects allow students to investigate their own contexts, which is in line with the underlying philosophy of the programs.

7. Describe how the PDO helps students understand the local contexts in which they are studying so that they can work together with others in the global context of your online PDO.

The situated learning philosophy that underlies the program emphasizes the importance of the global-local nexus. Course participants are encouraged to engage critically with all the material they are given, both in-house and published, to examine its relevance to their local contexts, and to develop responses that are principled and systematic but appropriate to the situation in which they find themselves. Issues of cultural bias and intercultural communication are also explicitly addressed in some of the materials, as well as underlying the program. Participants are then able to share their local responses through the online activities and thereby establish the global relevance of what they are achieving.

Participants need minimum technological resources to ensure contact both with tutors and amongst course participants but we strive to achieve maximum access to the program by not always using the latest technological advances, if we feel that these innovations may result in an inferior learning experience for those without access to new developments in Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

8. Describe how the PDO helps prepare students for the local contexts in which they will work.

As explained above, we operate an approach of situated learning whereby teachers research and write about their local contexts to fulfill the assessment criteria. The skills they develop in doing so equip them to be reflexive and reflective in whatever teaching context they consequently find themselves.

9. Explain the characteristics of the teacher educator(s) working in the PDO.

All teachers in the program are full-time lecturers/senior lecturers with doctorates and qualifications at Master's level in TESOL/EFL. They all have substantial experience in the use of the LMS, Skype, and Elluminate, and attend staff workshops to stay up-to-date with technological developments. Technology training is not offered as part of the PDO, but participants have access to technical support services.

10. Describe the non-teaching support staff in the PDO.

There is a sizeable administration team in the Department, which deals with both on-campus and distance-learning students. PDO participants are informed of the functions of different members of the team, so they know who to contact for submission queries, finance issues, and so on.

Distance learning participants have access to the full range of student services provided by the University. They are able to access these services by email or phone.



Services include access to technological support, to the Language Development Centre in the library for help with writing issues, and to the Counselling and Careers Services.

11. Explain the learning assessments used in the PDO.

All participants complete a Foundation Module, followed by four modules of their choice and a 16,000 word dissertation. All these elements need to be passed in order to graduate.

An exam option has recently been introduced for one of the modules, but assessment is largely by written coursework. The participants are all experienced and practicing teachers, and, in consultation with module tutors, they choose their own assignment topics related to their own teaching and learning contexts. This allows them to investigate and reflect on aspects of their own teaching and to consolidate the links between theory and practice.

12. Explain the mechanisms used to evaluate the PDO.

At the end of each module course participants are asked to evaluate the module and their experience of working on it through completing a Module Evaluation form. An External Examiner for the programs reviews students' work twice a year. The whole program undergoes an internal review every five years. The next round of review will be during the academic year 2012-13.

13. Discuss the challenges involved in offering this PDO online.

A distance learning program brings with it many challenges. First and foremost, course tutors need to be aware of technological advances and make informed choices in adopting technologies that support teaching and learning. Course participants need to be encouraged to be a part of a community so as not to feel isolated, and there are several ways technology helps address this.

On the MSc-TESOL programs a variety of technologies are used by the tutors. Documents and information that is of relevance to all the MSc-TESOL students are on a LMS site and each module has its own site where the module materials are stored. The LMS sites also allow for a Discussion Board to be used. The asynchronous Discussion Board encourages the students to get to know one another, share ideas and comments, raise concerns, and support peer learning. A generic email list, Majordomo, is also used by the course participants (and alumni, too) by opting in to be a part of this community. Similar to the Discussion Board the Majordomo email list provides the participants with an opportunity to be a part of a community, to ask questions, and share thoughts and ideas. While the Discussion Board is a closed group, the Majordomo list provides the opportunity for the course participants to interact with alumni and vice versa.

14. Describe the successes of the PDO and explain how they are documented.

Over the last 20 years, we have carried out two detailed surveys of alumni. Results from these surveys are reported in Copland, F., & Garton, S. (2012). *Life after online learning*. In L. England (Ed.), *Online language teacher education: TESOL perspectives* (pp. 64-77). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.. Results show that alumni are very satisfied with the program and that many have improved career prospects as a result of it, going on to become university lecturers, course book writers, and managers of English language teaching



The International Research Foundation
for English Language Education

centres, amongst other things. Importantly, our alumni participate globally in TESOL fora, publishing research articles, and presenting at conferences.