Introduction

Distance education refers to a mode of learning in which the learners are separated from the course tutor. Many technologies can be used to deliver Distance Education, including the internet, recorded videos, virtual classrooms (VCs), Virtual learning Environments (VLEs), online discussion forums and online Learning Management Systems (LMS). A course will be considered a Distance Education course if less than 50% of the learning content was designed to occur face to face (in a classroom or sports facility).

All British Athletics Qualifications offered via the Home Country Athletics Federations (HCAFs) should meet the same high standards in terms of the educational experience they offer to learners, regardless of the mode of learning and it is important to understand that although there are many advantages to distance learning, there are challenges which need to be understood and managed. Hallmarks of these standards include:

- A qualified tutor (HCAF tutor training, UKA Licensed Coach, orientation to the programme they will be tutoring on, orientation to the distance learning platform and linked technologies).
- Guided activity to support learning.
- Opportunity for the learner to periodically assess their progress towards the qualification learning goals.
- Best practice VLE and VC delivery guidance

Standards for Distance Education Courses

Distance Education Courses must meet the following standards:

1) Tutors must be a qualified tutor (HCAF tutor training, UKA Licensed Coach).
2) Tutors must be orientated to the programme they will be tutoring on.
3) Tutors must be orientated to the distance learning platform and linked technologies.
4) HCAFs are responsible for verifying their tutor's qualifications and expertise as required in points 1-3.
5) The maximum numbers of learners per tutor in a virtual learning environment is 12.
6) The maximum length of session in a virtual learning environment is 120 minutes without a break, or 3 hours but including a 15-20 minute break.
7) UK Athletics and the HCAFs must have processes in place to verify that each learner registered, is the same learner who participates in and completes the course and receives the qualification and associated insurance. Examples are a secure log in and password, photo ID, cameras on during delivery.
8) The HCAFs must ensure that the platform used to provide virtual classroom sessions is secure and password protected.
9) Tutors must verify learners and emergency contact details at the start of each module and have an agreed plan with the HCAF to manage a remote emergency.
10) Tutors must have measures in place, to monitor and evaluate learner engagement; responding to those who do not engage in a 30-minute window (camera off, no contributions in chat or learning polls), with pre-prepared strategies.

11) Tutors must inform their HCAF contact of learners who do not engage throughout the course, despite strategies and interventions.

12) All UK Athletics' Policies and Guidelines for qualifications that apply to face to face courses, also apply to distance education courses. As with face to face courses, distance education courses must accommodate learners with disabilities.

Any synchronous interaction (for example in discussion sections, use of supporting resources, breakout rooms) must meet the following minimum set of standards:

a. Learners must be able to both see and hear the tutor (or have easy access when in breakout rooms) and view the learning materials (for example, physical or electronic whiteboard, power point or computer slides, break out rooms or peer review, etc.) with sufficient fidelity such that no significant information is lost.

b. Learners must have appropriate and effective ways of asking questions.

c. Learners should be able to hear questions asked by other learners and the tutor's answers.

13) When grouping learners for break out activity and break out rooms, tutors should consider and manage the learning needs and safety of the group. The minimum number of learners in a breakout room should be three people.

14) Tutors must confirm that learners have access to all resources associated with the qualification and inform the HCAF Education contact of any learners who have been unable to access these.

Best practice guidelines for a Virtual Classroom (VC) environment:

1) One risk of VC environments is that learners disengage. British Athletics course design uses tasks and activities to promote engagement at frequent intervals from participants to minimise the chances of learners multi-tasking or disengaging altogether (approximately 90% of people multi task on virtual sessions). Tutors should follow the tasks in the tutor notes as directed for this reason.

2) The tasks mentioned above, require planning, setting up and orchestrating during the course. The course tutors responsibility is delivery of the course content in the tutor notes and best practice suggests that a tutor is supported by a producer or co-facilitator to manage the IT requirements of the course such as , whiteboards, break out rooms, polls, chat function, engagement oversight. If this is not available, then the tutor needs to have the tasks, whiteboards and polls set up well before the course starts.

3) VC environments require a great deal of concentration, with little natural break as in a face to face situation and for this reason course design needs to consider what can be done away from the course, learning design and module length. British Athletics courses have accommodated this in the following ways: Home work tasks, self- guided modules, narrated videos, maximum VC module length of 120 minutes, with a 5 minute break half way through, or 180 minutes with a 15-20 minute break half way through, interaction opportunities every 5 minutes, a requirement to keep cameras on, using images and animation to enhance the tutor voice wherever possible. Tutors should value the homework tasks and use the tutor notes to manage time and engagement.

4) Best practice recommends 6-8 learners per tutor with a maximum of 12, for the reasons listed above. British Athletics tutor notes have been written for 10 and the supporting course risk assessment reflects an absolute maximum of 12. As tutors deliver independently, the requirement will be for a Lead tutor to facilitate this course type.

5) Using video is valuable, but bandwidth has to be good for all participants to get the same experience. To manage this, British Athletics have put all video resources in a designated course module in MyLearning and the course has been designed to either use the videos as homework, or in breakout rooms following participant independent viewing.

6) Microphones (if not muted) can cause interference and guidance in the British Athletics tutor notes is to ask all participants to mute their microphones unless speaking. Best practice to manage this is for tutors to ask participants to indicate they have a question by using the "wave" icon or chat and to acknowledge something with the "thumbs up" icon.

7) Building rapport – This is more important in a VLE space, as some non-verbal cues available in a face to face environment are reduced and the IT environment can initially be a barrier. Best practice is for the tutor to start using names and welcoming people as they arrive, getting participants to use the chat function to meet each other. In a VC environment the tone of a tutor's voice becomes the main cue to a participant. Remember this and try to keep it "up-beat".

8) By directly using people's names – make a habit of talking to each learner directly (and perhaps getting a response from them) every 10 minutes minimum.

9) For break out activity, instructions need to be extremely clear – what to do and what to come back with, as well as identifying a spokesperson, if required. In addition, some other top tips include:
a) Remember to put your timer on when they start
b) Visit each room to check they are ok – or provide feedback. Tell them before the breakouts start if you are going to do this
c) If you have more than 1 breakout in a session, mix up the groups.

10) Technical issues- Allow time for learners to log in and to be orientated to the platform. If your participants are in the lobby early and you are ready, let them in and start the process. It may save you time in the long run! Things going wrong, i.e. booting yourself out, giving someone else admin / tutor rights. Have a back up plan!

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