



A Buyer's Guide to Distance Learning Finding the Course You Want

Distance learning may be just what you need.

Perhaps you want to acquire new skills, but can't afford time off work. Perhaps you now have the time to explore those subjects you've always wanted to. Perhaps school didn't work for you...

With distance learning you can learn how, when and where you want. New ways of learning, new opportunities, and new qualifications become available. And you take responsibility for your own learning.

A good provider will give support, but will leave you in control.

So you need to be sure the course is right for you before you buy. Learning is a lifelong investment; it is important to invest wisely.

Here are some questions to ask yourself, and the provider, before you buy.

The Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODL QC) is an independent body that was set up in 1969 at the request of Government.

Our website (www.odlqc.org.uk) has:

- **more information about distance learning,**
- **a form to order copies of our leaflets, and**
- **details of the courses currently offered by accredited providers.**

ODL QC accreditation assesses a provider's course materials, publicity, administration and tutorial support, to check that they meet ODL QC's published Standards.

So we, and you, can be sure that accredited providers offer high quality learning opportunities.

ODL QC, 16 Park Crescent
London W1B 1AH

020 7612 7090
info@odlqc.org.uk
www.odlqc.org.uk

THE COURSE

Can you look at the course first?

Look before you learn. Is there a trial or cooling-off period at the start when you can get a refund if you return materials undamaged?

Does the provider have open days, or allow you to look at materials if you visit their premises?

Is the course right for you?

Is the course too elementary, or too advanced? Is it interactive enough? Does it look attractive, or just boring?

How much support?

On some courses, learners can contact tutors at any time by telephone, fax, or email. On others, contact may be only by post, or through the marking of assignments. Lots of support can make a course expensive, so you need to weigh up the options.

In distance learning you are in control. Don't expect the provider to chase you; they'll support you, but not manage your learning for you.

Would you like to talk to others on the course? Is this possible?

If you might need extra support because of a disability, tell the provider as early as you can, and in writing. They'll explain how they can help, so you can decide if the course will be suitable for you.

Is there face-to-face training?

Can you complete the entire course at home, or do you need to spend some time at a regional or national centre? Most hands-on skills benefit from some face-to-face teaching. Some professions require it.

Can you talk to former students?

Some providers will let you talk to former students who can recommend the course. (As part of the ODL QC assessment, we check that learners are satisfied.)

Have previous learners been successful?

This information may not be available. But still ask. Distance learners often have more control, and motivation, than face-to-face learners, so success rates may be higher.

Can you compare courses between providers?

Are similar courses offered by other providers? If so, compare prices and levels of support on offer (and success rates if they are available).

QUALITY

Is the provider independently inspected/accredited?

When the government pays for education, in Universities, FE Colleges and schools, it also inspects to ensure quality. For private education, accreditation is voluntary, and not a legal requirement.

ODL QC accredited organisations offer a guaranteed good quality service that meets the Council's published Standards. With non-accredited providers, you have no such reassurance.

Providers may use other "marks" to indicate quality.

A provider may have an awarding body's logo in its publicity. This does not necessarily mean that the awarding body approves or endorses the course; it may not even have looked at it. It may just indicate a link between the course and an award.

A provider may use membership of another organisation to show that it is reputable. If so, check:

- Is that other organisation well-respected? Suspect providers have been known to set up their own accrediting agencies or so-called national bodies to give the appearance of independent inspection and quality control.
- Under what circumstances does that other body allow its name to be used in publicity material?
- Does membership imply any real level of quality control? Are the provider's courses assessed or inspected? The provider may only have to pay a fee, and do nothing else.

Membership of Investors in People, Chartermark or ISO may also be used to reassure learners. These acknowledge quality in other areas. They may suggest that the distance learning provision is of good quality, but do not guarantee it.

ODL QC accreditation is the best assurance of quality in distance learning. So if the provider is not accredited by ODL QC, ask why not.

Is help available if things go wrong?

Learners with ODL QC Accredited Providers are covered by the **ODL QC Guarantee**.

If you receive a poor service, or have a dispute you cannot resolve, ODL QC will look into your case.

If your provider is not accredited, and things go wrong, that reassurance is not available. You may be on your own.

OUTCOMES

What do you want to achieve?

Are you: looking for a particular qualification;
looking for particular skills, not qualifications;
wanting to change career;
or just interested in the subject?

Good providers will offer advice on qualifications and careers. But they also want to sell you a course. So do your own research.

Is it "recognised"?

The term "recognised" is widely used, but not widely understood. Some qualifications, like GCSEs, are part of a national system. These are externally verified and mark a specific level of achievement.

Other certificates and diplomas may be part of the national system, but many are not. But they may still be widely respected by employers in the subject.

ODL QC accreditation means that providers are reputable, and that learning with them should be a good experience. We do not award or validate qualifications, and our accreditation does not mean that a course leads to an externally-approved qualification.

Think about where you'd like to use the qualification; do your homework first.

For some professions, you need certain qualifications before you can practice. Even where there is no legal requirement, employers may prefer particular awards.

Local careers centres, professional bodies or potential employers may be able to offer help to understand qualifications in your chosen career.

Will there be an exam at the end?

When and where you will be able to sit the exam? Finding an exam centre can be difficult for distance learning students. Most providers will help, but they may leave it up to you.

Will the syllabus be the same when you want to sit the exam? If in doubt, ask the awarding body, not just the provider.

Are there time limits?

Do you have to finish the course, or take the exam, by a certain date? Can you re-take the exam if you fail?

COSTS

How much will it cost?

Check the total cost before registering. Does the price include the cost of books or equipment; exam fees; travel and accommodation to any face-to-face training; extending the course beyond specified time limits; or re-taking exams if you fail first time round?

Is financial support available?

Careers Advice (0800 100 900) will know if there's a current government scheme to help pay for learning. For work-related training, you could get a Career Development Loan (0800 585 505). Extra help may be available if you receive unemployment benefit – your job centre will have details. EGAS - the Education Grants Advisory Service, can also help to find funding (020 7254 6251).

Grants and loans can be spent with lots of different organisations. Providers don't have to have been independently assessed to accept a grant or loan. The fact that a provider can access government funds does not imply it has been independently approved or recognised.

When can you get your money back?

You may change jobs, become pregnant, fall ill, or lose interest. You may decide the course is not right for you. You may fail your exams. Can you get a refund?

Policies on refunds vary considerably. Accredited organisations do not have to conform to a standard policy. But they must make their policy on refunds clear in their promotional material.

There should be a trial period at the start. But check when this starts, and how long it lasts. Refunds may be available later in the course, or even at the end, if you have not been successful. But they may not be available, or only available in exceptional circumstances.

Read before you sign. If in doubt, get it in writing.

FURTHER ADVICE

ODL QC has details of good *quality providers*; and if you study with one of them, we will look into your case if things go wrong.

Careers Advice (0800 100 900), has information on *providers*, and *funding*. They do not check the quality of providers on their list.

If you're interested in a certain career, ask at a **Public Library**, **Career** or **Job Centre** for information on *qualifications* and *professional bodies* for that sector.