

Guidelines when considering continuing (online) education courses.

General comment

Online continuing education courses and programmes vary widely in quality, and not all will qualify for CPD points under the NZIMLS CPD programme. Before enrolling, members are strongly advised to check with the CPD Coordinator whether the course is eligible for CPD points and, if so, the level of points that may be awarded.

These guidelines are intended to help NZIMLS members assess whether a course or programme is suitable for career development, personal development, and CPD purposes. They do not recommend specific online learning options, either nationally or internationally; rather, they provide criteria to help members decide whether a course is likely to offer genuine value, particularly for CPD and professional development.

Knowledge improvement.

Why is the course being taken? Is it to improve knowledge and/or skills in the workplace or is it for general interest? If it is for the workplace, does the course improve your knowledge and skills or is it more like a revision course in a particular specialty? Seriously consider the benefit of any course for knowledge improvement and skills. A question should be “is this course for professional development or for interest only?”

Source of a course or programme.

This is very important as there is a very wide range of online courses, many of variable quality. Is the course from a reputable institution e.g. University or Polytechnic? There are several private agencies with courses linked to a university especially in the UK and a certain amount in Australia. These should be credible courses. Always do a search on the organisation or institution offering the courses. Some of these are just money-making schemes. Ask a colleague for advice.

Undergraduate or post-graduate?

This could be important depending on the intention of why a person is taking the course. Although it may seem obvious, undergraduate courses are essentially intended for people with no qualifications or possibly without a degree or studying for a first degree or an alternative qualification. For an experienced scientist or technician, the undergraduate course may be interesting but not particularly challenging and may have a reasonable proportion of known or existing knowledge as its content. The post-graduate courses are, as the name implies, at a higher standard and it would be expected that these courses would introduce new knowledge and skills and could be challenging.

Is there a curriculum or syllabus?

It is surprising how many online courses do not have a curriculum or syllabus for their programmes. This should always be looked for or the organisation contacted for one. Always avoid the courses that have no detail and the course that have several people indicating that “this course has changed my life” but no information even if it looks like the best course ever. A number of these courses are very poor quality and often money-making schemes. If a course is any good it will have a curriculum or a good course outline.

Method of learning.

There are many ways an online course can be delivered so it is important to understand the method(s) of course delivery before enrolling. If it is an overseas course, is there a requirement to all be online at the same time or can it be delivered at any time? Are there online ‘discussion groups’ and are these part of the course or just to facilitate course interaction? This type of group interaction may be the way the course administrators deliver information

etc., so it is important to be clear about this. Two terms often used in presenting course learning are 'summative' and 'formative'. Summative assessment is where the learning is assessed during or at the end of the course, usually by examination and compared against a standard or benchmark and would provide a mark or grade. Formative is where the learning process is monitored and feedback provided during the course, this can often be self or peer assessment but often there will be no mark or grade associated with this assessment.

How is the course delivered and assessed.

Clearly online courses are delivered away from the centre or organisation providing the course. Look at their website and try and judge their organisations capacity for course delivery. Do they deliver the course themselves, or do they use an agency for delivery? Check out the agency if they do. Do not take for granted that it is highly successful. Always confirm what the requirements are for undertaking the course e.g. computer capacity, delivery on both Macintosh and Windows, any special software etc. The software issue is important as the course may require some software from the institution and there may be a cost in accessing it. In addition, would it be compatible with the operating system of your computer? It is essential for clarity of how the course or parts of the course are assessed e.g. online questions at the end of modules, online essays etc. Be wary of courses that require no assessment at all. It is also important to know what you will get at the end of the course; a certificate (usually electronic) should be expected. If there is no certificate (or similar) where is the proof for completing the course successfully?

Quality of teaching material.

Will any teaching material be provided with the course? If so, is there an additional cost to access this material, which will often be provided online? Is the material 'locked' i.e. it can be used online but cannot be downloaded or printed? Are there any textbooks associated with the course and do the course organisers offer to sell them? Seemingly good book offers may not be the latest edition and will certainly incur shipping costs. Check book seller websites for pricing (and free shipping). Some publishers will sell direct and will be cheaper. Some courses will have their own textbooks but maybe only available as 'locked online' or as e-books. These will incur a cost. If it is possible get someone knowledgeable with the discipline to look over what is offered as teaching and reference material.

Quality of instructors and availability.

Probably all courses will advertise they are using top experts in their 'field', and many do have that sort of access to experts. If they are associated with a teaching or research institution these can be checked via the institution websites. Look for what they teach, research activities and publications. If they are truly 'experts' they will be delivering in at least two of those areas. If not, then simply Google them and see what can be found. Never take the word of the organisation who will be teaching the course; always check. You need to know when the teachers will be available for questions and possible direction about the course. Will they be available or will they have someone, e.g., a postgraduate student to answer questions? If only electronic communications are used, then the turn-around time for enquiries is important.

Library and literature requirements.

Check if any access to a science or medical library will be required before enrolling on a course. It may be possible to gain access to a New Zealand University or Polytechnic library as a 'guest' for the duration of the course. If scientific or medical articles are required, it is possible to access these via inter-library loan from public libraries but there will be a charge for the article. Many Journals now have open access after approximately six months following publication, so articles can be downloaded for free from these Journals. The NZIMLS website has some information on accessing relevant information. Be cautious about buying articles from Journals as these are often expensive and can be as much as NZ\$100.00 or more for a single article.

Security.

Any external course carries the risk of viruses or malware; therefore, it is important that work computers should not be used for any external course. Ensure that your own computer has adequate protection before enrolling in a course and be careful about sharing course teaching material with others. Most reputable education organisations are very careful about unsolicited attacks, but it is always possible.

Course Projects or research orientated projects.

If a course has a practical component, i.e., work undertaken by the candidate as a requirement for the course, ensure that written permission has been given from the appropriate person if laboratory resources are being used including ethics approval if patient data is being used. Be careful about how much data is shared with others online. Check with the course supervisor what happens to the projects at completion of the course. If the project has significant findings seek local advice about what should be released for the project and what should not be included. If the project is suitable for publication, then submit it to a journal prior to submitting the project for assessment. This ensures that your data is under your name. If there is possibility of a patent, then seek expert advice before submitting your project for assessment. Patent laws vary around the world but a general 'rule of thumb' is that once a discovery/novel approach has been published it cannot be patented. The USA has different patent requirements so advice from the USA may not be applicable to the rest of the world. In the laboratory workbook where project or research data is being recorded, date and sign each page, this is proof of your work if there is ever a dispute on the results and in particular patents.

Feedback on the course.

Always check the course for options on course feedback. Any decent course will have a mechanism for course feedback. This may be ongoing during the course or a course feedback or evaluation at the end. If there is no option for course feedback be cautious about the course.

Achievement.

Always check whether there is a certificate or electronic badge on successful completion of the course. An email from the course supervisor stating "great result – well done" is not appropriate for the course fees that have been paid. Also, the adage "in the post" is not acceptable with online courses. Good, reputable courses will provide evidence of successful course completion. Certain online courses may offer the course for free but require payment for a certificate or that a candidate needed to enroll and pay for the certificated course. These conditions need to be checked before enrolling in any course. Prior to enrolling, verify whether a course is a crediting or non-crediting course, as the latter probably will not have a certification.

New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA).

Courses in New Zealand may have an NZQA Level ranking and these are usually from Universities or Polytech's. Information relating to the NZQA Level system can be found on the NZQA website (www.nzqa.govt.nz)

New Zealand related courses.

There are a wide range of courses offered in New Zealand suitable for professional development and it is recommended that these should be checked first. One excellent source is the Summer Schools offered by the Universities covering a wide range of subjects.