

Submission in response to White Paper on

Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Flexible and Distributed Learning

Since 2001 I have been involved in the study and practice of teaching and learning with technology and hold an MSc in the use of I.T. in Education (TCD, 2003). I welcome the proposal to set out a blueprint for what constitutes quality and best practice in the design and delivery of learning with technology.

Although I am currently working as consultant in a start-up online learning provider, this feedback is being offered in a personal capacity.

1 Terminology.

As an advocate of plain English, I'm concerned that the term 'Flexible and Distributed Learning' is neither widely used nor generally understood in this context. I prefer the term 'Flexible and Online (or 'E' or digital)- Learning'.

2 The structure of the document

The division of the document into organisational, programme and learner experience sections makes sense. The problem is, however, that the core guidelines document is set out differently and I think that this is unnecessarily confusing. My experience is that providers have limited resources and time constraints in which to operate. I suggest that it might be more user-friendly to have all documentation that deals with the same or related areas use the same sections for comparison purposes and so as to be able to find things more easily.

3 Fitness for purpose and user-friendliness.

In addition to my point at No 2 above, there are two additional points I would like to make in relation to the content of these guidelines:

- (a) There is limited reference within the guidelines to the important area of Fair & Consistent Assessment of Learners who learn with technology. It is good pedagogical practice to assess learners using the same techniques that have been used to support their learning. To this end, many e-learning providers are using tools such as 'badges' and e-portfolios. The current practice of 'portfolio-based' assessments at levels 4, 5 and 6 used in traditional classroom settings would benefit enormously from the adoption of digital portfolios. Many practitioners would like to know if such methods of assessment and storing assessment materials will be acceptable to QQI not just for online but for all assessments.

(b) I have a concern that the guidelines for flexible and e-learning may be discriminatory in that they go further than the standard core guidelines for traditional teaching and learning: viz. provisions around learning materials and resources, engagement of learners etc. – to my knowledge these elements are not currently covered in the regular QA Guidelines nor are they evaluated externally in traditional teaching contexts.

In conclusion, I would add a cautionary note: In Ireland we do not currently have the benefit of a public resource such as JISC - <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/> - which supports the use of flexible and digital teaching and learning within the UK. Practitioners in Ireland, providing innovative teaching and learning to meet the demands of modern day learners, are breaking new ground and need to be encouraged and supported. My concern is that these guidelines may serve to put them off rather than support them!

Gaye Kelly, BA., MSc. I.T. in Ed.

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