

Hibernia College Response to QQI White Paper on Blended Learning

1. General comments

The publication of the Topic-Specific Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines for Blended Learning is welcomed, as is the opportunity to offer some thoughts and feedback on this draft. The commitment of QQI to providing guidance to providers is acknowledged.

There are some useful considerations in the white paper, but the way in which the document is presented suggests that there are some significant conceptual flaws and these undermine the relevance of the text.

A fundamental problem within the white paper is the exclusion of online learning, i.e. where in the scope it states

“These guidelines are not intended: » to cover any programmes where the sole connection between the provider and the learner is online learning.”

In the absence of any rationale for this statement; of an explanation of how the earlier green paper on flexible learning has been succeeded by this particular white paper on blended learning; lack of detail on the implications of this, e.g. that QQI will no longer validate online only programme (if that is the intent), the reader is left with the impression that QQI is implicitly making negative judgements around online learning. This may not have been the intent, but in the absence of clarity on the place of the proposed policy within a wider policy suite which would address quality assurance arrangements around online learning, the over-riding impression given by the white paper is one of caution about, criticism of, or distrust in online learning.

This severely compromises the guidelines and restricts their capacity to offer truly valuable direction to providers. In addition to the confusion that arises from the types of definition used, as is discussed below, a critical matter is that the exclusion of online only provision from the guideline suggests that QQI will not validate online only programmes. This is a very important matter and should be addressed explicitly to assist providers in their planning, and enhancement practices.

2. Online Only¹

If it is QQI's intent to decline to validate online only programmes it is essential that this be stated clearly.

However, if such an intention underpins this document, it raises a range of serious concerns and perhaps unintended consequences. As currently expressed, it does not seem to be a reasonable position for a statutory awarding body (which is also the national quality assurance agency, as is illustrated by the points below.) Whilst perhaps the interpretations we are making are inaccurate, it

¹ As discussed in section 4 below, the term blended learning reflects a continuum and online is at one end of that continuum. The UNESCO paper referred to below (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002351/235170E.pdf>) defines online as any programme of which greater than 80% is taught online, and for convenience that definition is implied here.

is important that we share them to illustrate the potential interpretations and concerns which emerge.

2.1. Such a prohibition (the validation of online only programmes) suggests that either QQI has no confidence in online provision or that it does not have the tools to quality assure and validate “online only” provision.

- Should this be the case, it suggests that QQI has omitted to look at evidence and research such as that published by the National Forum on Teaching and Learning. In *TEACHING AND LEARNING IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION: A ROADMAP FOR ENHANCEMENT IN A DIGITAL WORLD 2015-2017*, e.g.

“No significant difference has been demonstrated between online and traditional formats, though evolving evidence suggests better results from well-designed online courses. Distance learning can be of very high quality and be highly regarded by students, employers and others as demonstrated by the UK’s Open University. Well-designed online courses demand more active learning from students both in terms of their contribution and peer learning activities.”²

- Organisations such as the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities have established benchmarks for quality assurance in e-learning and have a well-established E-XCELLENCE label.³
- In September 2017 Esther Heurtas of ENQA stated that the current *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* are “fully applicable to e-learning provision”.⁴

2.2. Where other Irish awarding bodies have no such prohibition on the validation of online only provision, it will

- isolate QQI as an awarding body
- put QQI in an invidious position where it must conduct institutional reviews of HEIs with awarding powers who have online only validated provision
- discriminate against QQI providers who wish to have online only programmes validated

2.3. An additional concern with such an approach would be that QQI would be lagging behind various national and international strategies and approaches which advocate greater use of the online environment. For example

- The National Forum on Teaching and Learning document *TEACHING AND LEARNING IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION: A ROADMAP FOR ENHANCEMENT IN A DIGITAL WORLD 2015-2017* states “Effective online learning requires a different approach to teaching and learning design. Digital is not going to go away. It has already begun to profoundly change education. Teachers are engaging with technology, and

² <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Digital-Roadmap-web.pdf>

³ <http://e-xcellencelabel.eadtu.eu/>

⁴ <https://www.slideshare.net/EADTU/eadtuenqa-pla-recommendations-for-ga-of-elearning/1>

research conducted internationally is mirrored by findings from the National Forum which indicates there is a growing appetite for it.”⁵

- In 2015 UNESCO published a report on *Distance Education in the European Higher Education Area – the Potential*, see <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002351/235170E.pdf>. Respondents to a survey included persons who stated their motivation for distance learning was that “distance education is easier to combine with my job’ is the most often selected reason, chosen by 32% of the respondents. This result is also supported by other studies which show that job-related motivations are a strong determinant for distance education.”
- The 2014 High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education *Report to the European Commission on New Modes of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* stated “Over the next 10 years, e-learning is projected to grow fifteen-fold, accounting for 30% of all educational provision.”⁶

2.4. A final critical question which arises, is where does this put providers of the previously online only validated programmes and more importantly their graduates? The exclusion of a model for the validation of online only programmes suggests a distrust or at least a disregard for this type of provision, yet there are hundreds of QQI graduates of these types of programmes. The white paper as currently articulated may be interpreted to invalidate these graduates’ qualifications.

3. Incremental Approach to Validation Policy Development in the context of blended/online programmes

As stated above, the document is not clear what QQI’s exact approach to the validation of online programmes is, either in the short or long term. If there is an intent to develop a policy position for “online” programmes in the future, after the development of a policy on “blended learning” programmes, arguably this is not a helpful approach because of the diverse meanings of those terms and also because such a model does not address the reality of provision in Irish higher education institutions currently, nor in institutions internationally.

4. Online as part of a blended programme

Within the white paper itself, there is some confusion of terminology where the term ‘blended learning’ is often used to refer specifically to the online component of a blended approach. This makes the document unnecessarily confusing and difficult to follow.

The guidelines do not define blended learning in a way that specifies the variation within the blended approach. While Garrison and Kanuka’s (2004) definition cannot be argued with, it is not sufficiently detailed to provide a meaningful context within which to discuss approaches to blended learning. It does not make explicit the wide diversity of approaches within the term ‘blended

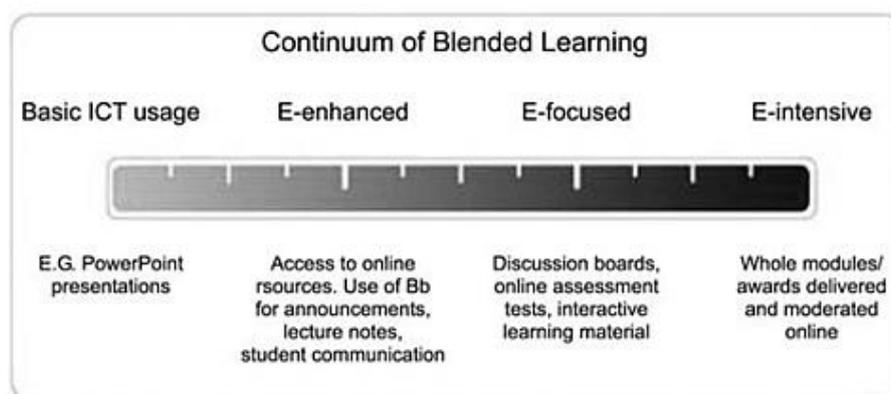
⁵ <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Digital-Roadmap-web.pdf> see page 8

⁶ 2014 High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education *Report to the European Commission on New Modes of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/reports/modernisation-universities_en.pdf

learning', which range from very traditional face to face (F2F) programmes, with minimal online components and little in the way of flexibility to almost wholly online programmes with a limited number of F2F meetings and extensive flexibility. Some discussion of approaches to blended learning and rationales for those approaches might be useful in framing the guidelines for providers.

We suggest that blended learning should be characterised as falling along a continuum as proposed by Jones (2006) (Fig 1). Such a conception could accommodate a range of blended learning approaches and would make it possible for these guidelines to provide more specific and relevant guidance. In fact, it may be the case, as predicted in Bonk and Graham (2012)⁷, that the term 'blended learning' becomes redundant as increasingly all forms of education provision incorporate some online elements. It would therefore appear more useful to view the continuum of teaching and learning approaches as stretching from the wholly face-to-face to the wholly online.

Fig 1



Source: Jones (2006)

Specific comments

The comments above relate to the overall framing of the white paper. What follows are comments relating to specific items in the body of the paper.

Page 5-6 states that *'The guidelines are constructed to support the fact that the more typical blended learning programmes are those face-to-face programmes which respond to online learning remoteness and create a virtual learning environment by providing remote access to learning opportunities'*.

This is quite a confusing statement and its intent is a little difficult to decipher. Notwithstanding this, our understanding is that it suggests that blended learning typically emerges from face-to-face programmes. We would argue that while this may or may not be the case (the statement is not backed up by any evidence), it is not necessarily the best basis for the creation of a set of best practice guidelines, i.e. it is not helpful to characterise blended learning programmes in terms of what is typically happening on the ground. Rather the focus should be on best practice in blended pedagogical design that considers all elements of a blended approach (face-to-face and online components) equally. These could be framed within a context of the affordances of both modes of

⁷ Bonk, C.J. and Graham, C.R., 2012. *The handbook of blended learning: Global perspectives, local designs*. John Wiley & Sons.

delivery, e.g. face-to-face opportunities for social interaction and online in terms of increased flexibility and access.

There are various places where there appears to be an implicit assumption within the paper that online learning is inherently inferior and needs to incorporate a face-to-face element to mitigate against this inferiority. This is not borne out by evidence. On the contrary, a highly regarded meta-analysis of online learning commissioned by the US Department of Education and conducted by Stanford Research Institute International found that 'online learning appears to offer a modest advantage over conventional classroom instruction' (Means et al, 2009, p.xv)⁸.

Bearing this context in mind, it might be useful to consider if the level of scrutiny directed at online components is commensurate with that directed at face to face (F2F) components. Ref:

- Paragraph 4.2.1 (1st paragraph - how does this compare to the requirements for F2F teaching?)
- Paragraph 4.3.2 (bullet 3 – what does 'fully designed' mean in this context and how does that compare to the requirements for F2F teaching?)
- Paragraph 4.3.7 (final paragraph – is this unique to blended learning?)

In summary, we feel that the guidelines would be much more coherent, forward-looking and effective in raising the standard of online and blended teaching and learning approaches if they embraced the notion of a continuum of teaching and learning modalities – extending from entirely face-to-face to entirely online – and focused on promoting best practice pedagogical design within such a framework.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this feedback.

Hibernia College

3rd November 2017

⁸ Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M. and Jones, K., 2009. Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies. US Department of Education.