



White Paper –Topic Specific Quality Assurance Guidelines for Blended Learning

Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin have already provided a response to an earlier draft of the guidelines in November 2016 and welcomes the updated document received on 31 August 2017.

We note QQI's intention to release a Green Paper on Online Education. Feedback received on the blended learning guidelines suggested that it would seem important to provide these, in addition (or before) setting out guidelines for blended learning. It is anticipated that they will provide more detail on some of the following areas: confirming the identity of remote learners, eliminate fraudulent practices [3.1.3] and 'cyberbullying' [4.2.1].

The response below is based on the collated responses from a range of academic and administrative staff across Trinity in Schools, IT Services and Centre for Academic Practice and Student Learning.

Section 1: Introduction (p. 3-6) As a Designated Awarding Body, Trinity does not differentiate or promote our programmes of education as 'blended learning programmes'. The University's Awards on the National Qualifications Framework are likewise not differentiated as blended learning programmes. Only programmes and Awards that are 'wholly online' are differentiated and the majority of these fall within our postgraduate provision.

Comment was received on clarification of the scope of the guidelines e.g. is there was a threshold / percentage linked to student effort, at which these guidelines apply? The guidelines do not appear to discriminate between what many consider as current normal practice and what is unique to 'blended learning programmes'. For example, there is no distinction between a course that is primarily face-to-face with the use of a VLE and Turnitin; and a course that is 80% online with a single or a few face-to-face meetings of the class.

Clarification is sought on whether the combination of the use of a VLE and Turnitin would result in all education provision for credit, other than 'wholly online' falling under the guidelines, even where the VLE may only be used as content repository and a communication tool?

It was felt that it was not helpful to categorise students as either face-to-face or online, as this raises the possibility of treating learners differently. It would be more useful to categorise the learning methods used and perhaps the programme overall. In reference to students outside Ireland [3.4], it is important to give consideration to the student supports that can offered in a local jurisdiction at distance from the provider e.g. regulations covering student counselling supports in different jurisdictions.

Section 2.3: Organisational context

Trinity is currently in the implementation, planning phase of its Trinity Education Project (TEP). TEP is a key strategic project that addresses curriculum reform for undergraduate education provision and includes a Technology Enhanced Learning stream that will determine our organisational strategy in this area.



It is worth noting that feedback from stakeholders with a vested interest in blended learning – instructional designers, eLearning specialists and programme directors for existing wholly online programmes responded that the guidelines captures the importance of:

- robust technical infrastructure and support;
- increased digital capacity for lecturers;
- the need for Schools to ‘design in’ blended learning into programmes at the curriculum design stage;
- providing support and information to lecturers on the design, development and delivery of blended learning, including online assessment, grading and giving feedback, online group or project work;
- using technology in online formative and summative assessment to provide lecturers with efficient and effective modes to give feedback.
- providing support through the Schools for students on how to use blended learning within their modules;

From an IT Services perspective, in the prescribed context where learners are participating in face to face as well as distance learning, the existing technical infrastructure standards are appropriate and can be measured against, without significant additional internal provision. However were the strategy to extend to offer blended, as opposed to wholly online, for credit courses to overseas learners, there would need to be closer consideration of the proposals including technology to confirming the identify of remote learners and eliminating fraudulent practices [3.2.2].

From the viewpoint of academics involved in the delivery of ‘wholly online’ programmes “more technical support would be welcome, since it is often technical issues that impede delivery”.

Trinity currently has a small eLearning team responsible for supporting the academic community in the design and development of blended learning and building digital capacity through a professional development programme. The implementation of the Guidelines may represent a challenge to all Higher Education Institutions in the current economically constrained environment and the Employment Control Framework e.g. to recruit additional instructional designers/academic developers [3.1.3]; to acts as subject matter experts to curriculum development teams [3.3.2, 4.1.4] and build capability in academic and administrative staff [3.2.4, 4.3.1].

The requirement for new policies and procedures and/or the adaption of current policies, procedures was also recognised by academic and administrative staff - Boards of Examiners and External Examination. Trinity’s External Examiner Annual Report Template currently identified programmes as ‘face to face’ and ‘online’ and includes a question where the mode of delivery is ‘wholly online’. It was suggested in feedback on the Blended Learning Guidelines that external examiners could fulfil some of the peer review function prescribed in the guidelines e.g. of learning resources. How this additional requirement would be received by external examiners and if it would attract further time and in turn, reimbursement, would need to be considered.

Finally it was noted that the guidelines refers to staff appraisal arrangements [3.1.3] but these are not addressed in the bullet list below. Such procedures are also mooted in 4.3.1 and 4.3.7.



Section 4: Programme context

It was felt important from a School perspective that the requirements for procedures

‘be kept simple and minimally burdensome, that they allow for flexibility of practice and acknowledge the continuing usefulness of traditional teaching methods such as the seminar’

Moreover requirements for learners on programmes with online elements should not be in excess of those already required for learners on programme with wholly face-to-face elements:

‘Quality assurance procedures are applied across all modules offered by the School, including those delivered through blended learning, through practice placements and through traditional pedagogical formats; no module-specific quality assurance procedures are implemented within our School’.

The quality assurance of the achievement of the learning outcomes is linked to the initial design and approval of new programmes and includes internal and external peer review processes. While it is anticipated that the associated procedures and templates may need to be reviewed in light of the Guidelines, recognition needs to be given that at the time of the initial programme design and approval process, development of the blended/online learning resources may not yet, be developed or completed and thus cannot be tested.

The Guidelines suggest that the ongoing or post initial approval quality assurance of blended learning resources be delivered through the development of ‘curriculum development teams’ (4.1.4 p 19). This represents a significant cultural departure from existing practice in universities where academics have substantial autonomy to develop their own teaching and learning materials and resources. The role of curriculum development teams and internal and external peer review outlined in 4.2.1 would seem to be difficult to implement on a large scale, if the number of blended learning modules increases and could become quite contentious. A way forward suggested by one academic is for:

‘A combination of a clear overall framework and a measure of individual staff autonomy and flexibility in delivery (i.e. some scope to make changes while modules are happening) is essential’

It was noted by one School in their response that while:

...‘we perhaps do less to monitor fellow staff members in their provision of online materials, but many of our modules are team-taught and staff thus do witness and comment on each other’s practices, as well as working collaboratively’.

A request for further detail on assessment practices in blended learning was welcomed (beyond what is mentioned in 4.1). It was recommended in respect of Assessment (5.1.6 bullet point 4, p. 26) that provision of formative assessment in online sections should not be singled out or separated from the face-to-face sections of the programme. Rather it should be provided as part of a programme-focused approach to assessment which considers assessment for, as, of learning across the programme, both online and otherwise.



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Section 5: Learner experience context

It was felt that the guidelines in this section can largely be accommodated within School existing procedures. The importance that learners get a clear explanation of the blend of learning that they will experience was acknowledged in comments received and this may be delivered through the VLE Student Handbooks and/or School websites. It was noted that in blended learning much of the discussion and personal interaction elements take place in the classroom and supervision continues to occur face - to - face and all undergraduate and postgraduate students are provided with feedback opportunities at module and/or programme level.

For blended learning to work [5.1.3], it was noted that students need access to computers and the internet, and this tends to be harder for students from less privileged backgrounds. Both at College level and nationally, this should be addressed through further provision of e.g. free laptops, easily accessible Wi-Fi.

Specifically with respect to blended elements it was felt important to be transparent with learners about the tracking of their progress and achievement via online platforms; and further guidance was sought from QQI on how to 'convert' student effort tables to reflect online effort in a blended learning environment.

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Responding on behalf of Trinity College Dublin

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