

## Summary of Feedback on QQI White Paper:

### *Topic-Specific Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines for Blended Learning*

v1.0 (31.10.2017)

This QQI White Paper, and an invitation for comments, was widely circulated to key staff within UCD. This included, but was not limited to, staff who had been consulted on the initial *White Paper on Flexible and Distributed Learning*. The feedback on the updated guidelines is summarised below.

#### Key General Points

- The document is welcomed, is very comprehensive and sensible (and in some ways may simply be stating the obvious), and allows for the wide range of what might be considered 'Blended'. It recognises the key components of blended as well as acknowledging that good practices for any type of learning apply equally to blended learning.
- To be inclusive of the full spectrum of blended learning formats, there would be value in considering a renaming of the guidelines to '*Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Online Learning*' or '*Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Blended and Online Learning*'. In reality, many of the guidelines would also be applicable to online learning inclusive of all formats and blends.
- The definition of 'blended learning' offered in the guidelines does not take into consideration the spectrum of blends of online learning, nor does it quantify the time/percentage of learning activities/assessments delivered online. It is not helpful to the user in terms of differentiate between the various modes of online learning i.e. technology-enhanced, blended or fully online.<sup>1</sup> The guidelines should be all encompassing rather than specifically focused on one mode of online learning i.e. blended. Furthermore, the terms 'blended learning' and 'online learning' are used interchangeably throughout the document and in its current context this is confusing.
- Individual institutions will need to consider whether they comply with the infrastructure and resource requirements outlined and implied by the QQI guidelines. Within UCD, while there is plenty of training and pedagogical resources and *ad hoc* workshops available to those who use online and blended learning (often delivered by those pioneers), from a wider UCD infrastructure perspective there is not a lot of support; staff mostly buy their own software within the Schools; consult with each other for what works and what doesn't; do their own troubleshooting and, a lot of the time, hope for the best. Further information internally about the strategic plan for investment or contingency arrangements to ensure the resources are available to enable alignment with the QQI guidelines would be useful.

#### Key Points on Specific Provisions in the White Paper

- **Section 3** – *“Although all learning is learner-centred, blended learning is learner-centred in a way that means providers must be aware and prepared for both its opportunities and its challenges at the level of the organisation.”* It is difficult to make any sense of this sentence.
- **Section 3.1.1** – A strategic plan for online learning should be clearly linked (or incorporated into) the institution's overall education/teaching and learning strategy, and it should be widely understood and appropriately cross-referenced with other key institutional policies/strategies/plans. Furthermore, there should be compatibility between approaches to online learning taken by individual departments, Schools and Facilities in line with institutional plans.
- **Section 3.1.2** – This point speaks to ensuring that existing policies/processes (originally designed for face-to-face provision) are fit for purpose for online learning. In addition there may be a need for defined policies and management processes for the development of online learning.
- **Section 3.2.4** – *“The delivery system for each online module or section of study is fit for purpose.....”* In keeping with best practice in curriculum design the emphasis here should be placed on the programme/course (not individual

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<sup>1</sup> See Allen, E. & Seaman, J. (2010). *Class Differences: Online Education in the United States*, Babson Survey Research Group

modules or sections of study). It might be better to re-phrase this in terms of ensuring that the delivery system for the online elements of a programme/course is fit for purpose and supports overall programme coherence (ie a consistent experience for programme students).

Furthermore, it would be worth considering expansion of this point to include an additional bullet point on the need for institutions/providers to continually investigate and monitor emergent educational technologies and developments in the field of online learning, and integrate new technologies into the learning environment as appropriate. Institutions should invest in, research and support online infrastructure and learning spaces that allow for blended and online learning approaches, including online student feedback, learning analytics, online submission of assignments, student created content, student sharing of own content and personalised student communications.

- **Section 4.1** – The high level (bolded) point should be expanded along the following lines: *The programme as a whole is intended to achieve specified learning outcomes. Online learning is effectively integrated into the programme for this purpose. Overall programme design is informed by best practice in curriculum design.*
- **Section 4.1.5** – *“Pedagogy informing learning and teaching is demonstrably learner-centred.”* The meaning of this is unclear.
- **Section 4.37** – *“Moderation processes are in place to ensure consistency and share good practice where more than one tutor is employed to support or assess more than one group of students.”* In UCD there are situations in some overseas programmes where a module is jointly taught by home-based and overseas staff, sometimes organised as multiple deliveries. In such cases, however, each assessment component is assessed by one person (i.e. the person who teaches the relevant section). This assures consistency in grading across components for the entire cohort. On this basis, I assume that moderation would not be a requirement here?
- **Section 5.1.1** – Under appropriate information for the learners, add in the following: *“Clarity on the specific level of engagement expected for different elements of the blend, for example mandatory participation in online activities in order to demonstrate participation in collaborative learning activity, face-to-face attendance requirement, synchronous and asynchronous activities, independent learning etc.”*