



# WHITE PAPER

## Topic-Specific Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines

FOR CONSULTATION

### STATUTORY QUALITY ASSURANCE GUIDELINES FOR BLENDED LEARNING

**VERSION 2**

This White Paper contains proposed topic-specific statutory quality assurance guidelines for use in the development, quality assurance and enhancement of programmes where provision is intended to be available to learners through a blended learning approach.

The earlier version of this White Paper was developed with the assistance of an expert reference group. Further development work has since been carried out by QQI following feedback from providers and other stakeholders.

*QQI is seeking feedback from stakeholders on the proposed policy contained in this White Paper.*

Submissions may be emailed to  
**consultation@QQI.ie**

The closing date for submissions  
is **Friday 3 November 2017**.

In your submission please clearly indicate:

1. *Your contact details.*
2. *Whether you are responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation.*
3. *If you do not wish your submission to be published.*

## CONTENTS

<b>SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT</b>	<b>3</b>
1 INTRODUCTION	3
1.1 <i>To whom do these guidelines apply?</i> [3]	
1.2 <i>What is the purpose of these guidelines?</i> [4]	
1.3 <i>Scope and relevance</i> [5]	
2 CONTEXT	6
<b>SECTION 2: THE GUIDELINES</b>	<b>8</b>
3 ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT	9
3.1 <i>Strategy and planning for blended learning</i> [10]	
3.2 <i>Infrastructure and resources</i> [12]	
3.3 <i>Published expectations on blended learning</i> [14]	
3.4 <i>Learners outside Ireland</i> [15]	
3.5 <i>Collaboration and other partners</i> [16]	
4 PROGRAMME CONTEXT	18
4.1 <i>Programme outcomes</i> [18]	
4.2 <i>Learning resources, materials and delivery mechanisms</i> [19]	
4.3 <i>Approval and programme validation processes</i> [21]	
5 LEARNER EXPERIENCE CONTEXT	24
5.1 <i>Support available to learners</i> [24]	
5.2 <i>Equality of opportunity</i> [27]	
<b>ANNEXES</b>	<b>28</b>
GLOSSARY OF TERMINOLOGY	28
RESOURCES	29

## SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

### 1 INTRODUCTION

---

This document outlines quality assurance (QA) guidelines established by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) for all providers of blended learning programmes. These guidelines are “statutory” guidelines: QQI must publish QA guidelines under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012 (referred to as the 2012 Act in this document). The 2012 Act further requires providers to “have regard to” QQI’s quality assurance (QA) guidelines when establishing their own quality assurance procedures.

These guidelines supplement the QQI *Core Statutory QA Guidelines* published in April 2016. While the *Core Guidelines* provide the general quality assurance guidance required, the guidelines in this document address the specific responsibilities of providers regarding the quality assurance of blended learning programmes and related services. These responsibilities are set out in general terms in the 2012 Act. Providers should also refer to QQI’s other sector-specific and topic-specific quality assurance guidelines as appropriate.

---

***These guidelines should be read in conjunction with QQI’s policy on QA Guidelines.***

***These topic-specific QA guidelines supplement and are in addition to the core QA guidelines.***

---

#### ***1.1 To whom do these guidelines apply?***

These guidelines are applicable to all types of providers providing blended learning programmes on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). They are produced for the attention of, and use by, providers establishing quality assurance procedures under the 2012 Act. The legal context varies between providers as follows:

- » Previously established universities and the National University of Ireland (NUI) are recognised

as autonomous and must have regard to QA guidelines in the development of their internal QA procedures.

- » Other awarding bodies, namely the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and institutes of technology, must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by QQI.
- » Independent or private providers providing blended learning programmes that come voluntarily to QQI to seek approval of their QA procedures and access to QQI awards. Such providers must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by QQI.
- » Linked providers must have regard to these QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by a designated awarding body.

Providers of all blended learning that is credit-bearing and/or contributes towards an award of QQI or another state awarding body are required to have regard to these guidelines. It is important that the teaching and learning experience is a positive quality experience, with quality assurance, improvement and enhancement in place. Providers offering blended learning that is neither credit-bearing nor leading to a qualification, are advised to be guided by the expectations and good practice captured here. This may mitigate the risk of reputational damage. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other less formal kinds of blended learning, for example, may be a learner's first online interaction.

## *1.2 What is the purpose of these guidelines?*

### **These guidelines are to be used:**

- » by providers when designing, establishing, evaluating, maintaining or reviewing their quality assurance procedures for blended learning.
- » as a basis for the approval by QQI of a provider's relevant QA procedures (other than previously established universities)

### **These guidelines are not intended:**

- » to cover any programmes where the sole connection between the provider and the learner is online learning.

- » to prescribe **how** providers are to operate blended learning programmes or how they establish their internal procedures. Rather, providers are expected to have internal systems of quality assurance for programmes with blended learning and related services which are appropriate to their individual contexts and include mechanisms that successfully monitor the effectiveness of those systems.
- » to refer to programme provision for exclusively online learning but online learning as previously defined as part of the blended learning context.

In so far as it is possible, these guidelines focus on what is distinctive in the blended learning context. In order to avoid duplication, confusion, or version control issues, it does not aim to replicate the other QQI policy and guidance that is already available and generic to all teaching and learning or curriculum design (for example) – whatever the mode of delivery.

### 1.3 *Scope and relevance*

These guidelines provide guidance to providers on the quality assurance and enhancement of blended learning where learners may be physically remote from:

- » other learners,
- » teachers and assessors,
- » the provider institution, or
- » learning resources and support services,

for part of their programme of study.

Providers will have regard to the guidelines in this document to inform the establishment (including amendments) of their quality assurance procedures for blended learning. It is anticipated that such procedures will be proportionate to the nature, scale and complexity of their blended learning or their aspirations.<sup>1</sup> The guidelines are constructed to support the fact that the more typical blended learning

---

<sup>1</sup> Attention is drawn to the [European Association of Distance Teaching Universities \(EADTU\)](#) self-assessment tool for providers of online learning E-excellence benchmarks, which offer providers both threshold and excellence benchmarks for effective online 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.

## 2 CONTEXT

---

Innovation in educational technology has expanded options for flexible learning experiences. For example, online learning, mobile and digital technologies, social media, and MOOCs are all harnessed to a greater or lesser extent by many providers, offering opportunities for a more flexible approach towards the delivery of learning. Such learning may or may not be credit bearing or certificated. These guidelines are neutral on the technology and face-to-face methodology used to support the remote interaction. Innovation will continue and new flexible and distributed models of learning will evolve. The focus, therefore, of the guidance provided here is on the quality assurance of provision and related services in the context of blended learning.

For the purpose of these guidelines, blended learning is “the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” as defined by Garrison and Kanuka (2004).<sup>2</sup>

Blended learning will always involve face-to-face learning. Providers engaged in blended learning will typically also deliver the face-to-face component. As with all types of learning/delivery, providers will look for the most effective and efficient means to support learners in achieving intended learning outcomes. Often this will require a blend of different learning and teaching strategies. It is commonplace that a programme described as blended learning will include a combination of, for example:

1. Online learning resources developed for online delivery
2. Access to learning technologies such as virtual learning environment
3. Tools to support virtual remoteness and off campus learning which is not always remote – virtual learning spaces and discussion and other forums to support students

---

<sup>2</sup> Garrison, D.R. & Kanuka, H. (2004). *Blended Learning: Uncovering Its Transformative Potential in Higher Education*. *Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95-105, p. 96.

4. Online activities to support formative and summative assessment
5. Face-to-face tuition
6. Assessment submitted, marked and returned to learners with feedback through electronic or other media

What has at times been problematic for blended learning providers has been the application of benchmarks and indicators originally conceived for face-to-face provision. For example, indicators related to teaching (contact time), accommodation (classrooms) or physical library facilities and buildings may not be appropriate in making judgements about aspects of online learning and provision.

Within institutions, blended learning options may be offered in all or few programmes, to small or large numbers of learners; and may form a substantive or small proportion of the learner's overall experience. Increasingly, providers offer learners some part of their face-to-face programmes as blended learning. The virtual learning environment (VLE) is typically the most popular technology used to offer a blended learning experience. The intention is that the good practice principles underlying this document will provide a reference point to inform practice across this spectrum.

## SECTION 2 GUIDELINES

These quality assurance guidelines are for providers involved in blended learning provision. The most typical form of non-face-to-face teaching and learning in place for blended learning is online learning. A provider moving into online learning and other blended learning formats needs to be in a position to demonstrate that it has understood, planned and approved any differences in its quality management that may be appropriate for such learning. It has reviewed its policies and regulations to ensure they are fit-for-purpose in context. Quality management arrangements for online learning provision are supported by fit-for-purpose organisational infrastructure and processes. For example, the collection and evaluation of feedback from internal and external stakeholders may require different arrangements to those in place for face-to-face provision.

Technology employed to deliver online learning can offer some significant advantages for quality assurance and enhancement. The way in which learning resources are used by learners can also be more easily monitored and evaluated than is the case with face-to-face contexts. Learning resources will also need to be quality assured in a different way. The provider's arrangements for validation of online provision will focus on some additional issues such as: design and development mechanisms for approving and updating learning resources; arrangements for student support and guidance in the online sections; and the availability and accessibility of appropriate library resources.

The guidelines are organised under the following headings:

**Organisational context**

**Programme context including development and assessment**

**Learner experience context**

The focus throughout the guidelines is on raising awareness of issues that are particularly pertinent to the online and overall blended learning context, rather than other kinds of learning and teaching.

### 3 ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

---

The focus of this section is on the strategic and institution-wide aspects of managing quality for blended learning, including administrative and technical infrastructure requirements for appropriately skilled personnel.

At the organisational level, it is necessary to demonstrate an understanding of the distinctive demands that blended learning will make on infrastructure and systems that are different to full-time face-to-face contexts. Where the nature of high quality online learning or other aspects of remote learning is not properly understood, provision that was originally designed for a face-to-face learning environment may be poorly adapted for learners. For example, teaching staff with no knowledge or experience of blended delivery may not appreciate the pedagogical opportunities and challenges. Learners will not generally have a good experience if what they receive are essentially learning resources, lectures and other resources that have been designed for face-to-face learners and made available online, for example. The responsibility of providers to offer a good learning experience, and the potential reputational risk of not doing so, is significant. 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.

Similarly, Information Technology (IT), administrative systems and infrastructure that have been designed for face-to-face delivery contexts are unlikely to be effective and efficient for blended learning. Specialist, reliable and accessible computer hardware and software applications are required for designing, developing and delivering online learning. Tracking learner progress and achievement, marking and returning assessments, providing feedback to learners and assessors are just a few of the areas where existing policies, systems and processes are unlikely to be fit-for-purpose in an online learning context.

A decision to deliver some or all provision through blended learning should therefore be a considered one and part of a provider's vision, supported by a deliberate and approved strategy. The enthusiasm

and expertise of a few people should not be the driver for such a decision, although it can be harnessed, recognised and valued. This usually means there is an approved strategy and plan, an appropriate investment of time, money and other resources to develop its capacity and resources to deliver high quality blended learning that will offer learners a consistent, enjoyable and effective learning experience.

### *3.1 Strategy and planning for blended learning*

**The provider's strategy, infrastructure and policies systematically address and enable any existing or planned arrangements for blended learning (incorporating online learning).**

Procedures are in place to ensure:

- 3.1.1 The strategic approach to the use of blended learning which is explicit and is shared with staff, learners and other stakeholders. A strategic plan includes appropriate investment in infrastructure and contingency arrangements to support all options for blended learning in online learning. Accountable key roles have been identified. Strategic plans at departmental, faculty and provider level are consistent in respect of the provider's strategy for blended learning. Approved strategies and implementation plans are clear about the provider's aspirations in relation to blended learning.
- 3.1.2 Policies, regulations and processes (including administration) are fit-for-purpose in the context of blended learning. The relevance of existing arrangements originally designed for face-to-face provision which may not always be appropriate and/or effective in the blended learning context. Examples include:
  - ~ online developments are subject to business case approval for viability and sustainability
  - ~ robust costing models are in place which take into account the additional costs associated with IT support; developing and updating learning resources; induction, training and support for staff and learners
  - ~ proposals ensure that market intelligence demonstrates that the scale of demand and income will ensure viability and sustainability
  - ~ recruitment and admissions policies and processes are open to any online requirements
  - ~ any additional registration arrangements are clear

- ~ appeals and complaints policies and processes accommodate remote learning
- ~ fees policy and processes have taken note of the online provision
- ~ arrangements for assessment including pre-assessment, the conduct of assessment and marking/grading are robustly tested and invoke confidence
- ~ regulations and arrangements for Boards of Examiners and External Examiners include any additional consideration for online learning experiences

3.1.3 The strategies and processes for the appointment, induction, training, professional development and appraisal arrangements for teaching and support staff are appropriate and specific to blended and online learning. For example:

- ~ Staff engaged to support online learners can either demonstrate previous experience of online provision or they are provided with appropriate induction and training.
- ~ There is a planned approach to the appointment of (or access to) specialist staff to support the provider's blended learning strategy. For example, specialist staff with academic, technical or professional expertise in the pedagogy/assessment appropriate to online learning and in educational technology.
- ~ There is planned close collaboration between the academic and other support personnel and specialist staff, such as teams involved in designing learning technologies and other methodologies supporting online learning.
- ~ There is a planned approach to staff guidance of online learners on any open education resources referenced including any intended or unintended endorsement of such resources.

Subject expertise and academic standing remain important criteria in recruiting appropriate staff but also include appropriate competencies required. For example, in designing a programme, understanding the pedagogical differences within a curriculum of supporting learners in a blended learning environment, such as VLE.

3.1.4 Arrangements for assuring compliance with any legal or statutory obligations are appropriate to the blended learning and online learning context. For example, this may include:

- ~ child protection
- ~ intellectual property and copyright

- ~ clear parameters on data protection including the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
- ~ protection for enrolled learners
- ~ applicable professional or statutory body requirements
- ~ local regulatory considerations in the context of transnational provision

3.1.5 Regulations and processes are fit-for-purpose in the case of learners located outside Ireland. Regulations and institutional processes that are appropriate in the face-to-face context can be a challenge in the blended learning or online learning context, including those governing Boards of Examiners and External Examiners; appeals and complaints; and student disciplinary arrangements. Processes that require learners to attend face-to-face meetings, for example, include appropriate technology to enable students to attend virtually.

3.1.6 Arrangements for collaboration or partnership as set out in the Core Statutory QA Guidelines facilitate any additional responsibilities to be specified for learners in a blended learning context.

## 3.2 *Infrastructure and resources*

**The infrastructure and resources required to support good quality blended learning are understood, planned, and routinely monitored and evaluated. These arrangements should take into account that online learners are likely to be remote from the provider and from teachers and/or assessors.**

Procedures in this context include:

- 3.2.1 A planned approach to the procurement of services (e.g. cloud services), hardware and software to support online learning and a clear policy on a common platform for approval of exceptions. Contingency arrangements are in place in the event of platform, hardware or software failures.
- 3.2.2 Robust and consistent systems and processes across the organisation to manage the submission, receipt, marking and return of assessments. There are robust arrangements in place across the organisation to confirm the identity of remote learners and eliminate fraudulent practices, attempts to gain unfair advantage, or academic malpractice. For example:

- ~ all systems and processes used are capable of:
  - ~ verifying the identity of learners;
  - ~ guarding against cheating, plagiarism or other kinds of unfair advantage;
  - ~ being reliable and scalable in the context of the provider and the strategic plan.
- ~ provision that is offered across different time zones, for example, may offer particular challenges.
- ~ cultural or religious calendars will also be a factor in timing and synchronizing assessment opportunities.
- ~ An institution wide approach to these matters.

3.2.3 The provider's student record system has been designed or adapted to support blended learning programmes and learners and the quality assurance of a more flexible learning experience.

3.2.4 Effective institutional arrangements are in place to provide assurance that:

- ~ Any blended learning elements of provision have had the reliability of their delivery systems tested and signed off in advance, with confirmation that appropriate technical support and contingency plans are in place.
- ~ Intellectual property rights and software licencing issues are addressed in the development and delivery of online learning.
- ~ The delivery system for each online module or section of study is fit for purpose, for example, with a clear statement of:
  - ~ resources needed to complement any online technology
  - ~ how the technology is to be used by teaching and other personnel involved both individually and collectively
  - ~ how it is to be used to confirm that the teaching and learning has occurred including assessment and feedback for each individual programme
- ~ The availability and life expectancy of the technology is appropriate to the nature of the blended learning provision, numbers of learners and duration of programmes. There is a need to determine the life expectancy of the technology over the duration of the programme.

- ~ Institutionally approved transitional arrangements are in place to support any migration to new or different technology (hardware or software), taking account of the need to maintain compatibility with the technology that learners are using.
- ~ A common policy and process is in place for ensuring that learners' work is properly attributed to them, particularly in cases where the assessment is conducted through remote methods that might be vulnerable to interception or other interference.
- ~ Those with responsibility for assessment have the means and authority to confirm that a learner's assessed work is the original work of that learner only, particularly in cases where the assessment is conducted through remote methods.
- ~ Mechanisms such as web-based methods or correspondence for the transfer of learners' work directly to assessors have been approved and tested by the institution to ensure they are secure and reliable; and there is an institutionally approved and consistent means of proving or confirming the safe receipt of student work.

### *3.3 Published expectations on blended learning*

**The provider has approved and published expectations for the overall quality of the blended learning provision, including expectations on the effectiveness and accessibility of learning resources and other learning materials to support online provision. The provider also has approved and published expectations for the effective delivery of teaching and learning and assessment opportunities adopted for blended learning, which are available to stakeholders.**

Procedures in place:

- 3.3.1 Make available benchmark or specification documents for learning resources; a programme validation and review process that includes consideration of those aspects specific to monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of learning resources and the learning environment.
- 3.3.2 Enable close collaboration between academic subject specialists and those responsible for online educational technology and/or instructional design in the development and delivery of online provision to ensure that:

- ~ developments are learner centred
- ~ developments are subject-led rather than technology-led
- ~ organisational structures and processes ensure that technology is in the service of pedagogy
- ~ open education resources referenced by the provider are subject to quality evaluation

3.3.3 Assessment practice and process provide consistent, equitable and fair arrangements for the setting, marking and return of feedback on assessment tasks to learners. Learners are provided with consistent, secure and reliable means for submitting work to be assessed and confirmation of receipt. There are institutional regulations and protocols to ensure confidentiality and security in feedback to individual learners on assessment, and for the recording of marks or scores.

### *3.4 Learners outside Ireland*

**Where the online learning provision is to be offered to learners outside Ireland, due diligence and risk management arrangements are robust and fit-for-purpose.**

Procedures in place include:

- 3.4.1 Internal approval processes to confirm that any relevant legal or regulatory requirements (e.g. in each jurisdiction) are met. For example:
- ~ requirements for local accreditation or recognition by statutory or regulatory bodies, which may be at programme and/or institutional level
  - ~ permission for foreign providers to operate within the local jurisdiction (if required)
  - ~ cultural considerations that may inhibit group interactions, for example between different religious groupings or synchronous delivery of content where gender considerations are required.
  - ~ regulations that may prohibit or inhibit the charging of fees
  - ~ other jurisdictional requirements that may influence the blend of learning permitted

3.4.2 An internal process to consider and approve business models and associated risk management to ensure viability and sustainability of quality. Matters that are specific or heightened in the online learning context include:

- ~ taxation
- ~ definitions of 'student' that may impact funding streams
- ~ the location of servers
- ~ employment law that may inhibit the ability to employ local tutors or other support functions
- ~ recognition of qualifications gained through online learning

3.4.3 That appropriate legal advice is sought to consider, for example:

- ~ that the location of servers will meet the needs of stakeholders in each jurisdiction
- ~ provider's software or learning resources licences will be valid; or other arrangements are in place
- ~ due regard is paid to local financial regulations or taxation issues
- ~ due regard is paid to local employment law
- ~ due regard is paid to local law or expectations on consumer protection
- ~ intellectual property rights or copyright are not compromised
- ~ learners' interests are safeguarded

3.4.4 That the provider can demonstrate that, before offering blended learning options to learners outside Ireland, it has tested delivery systems to ensure that learners outside Ireland will have equal access to support and to learning resources. For example, commonly used platforms routinely available in one country may not be available in other jurisdictions.

### *3.5 Collaboration and other partners*

**Where a provider is relying on a second provider, partner or collaborator to provide aspects of blended learning such as online learning, a number of aspects are covered by the internal QA procedures.**

- 3.5.1 Formal written agreements are in place which clearly specify the respective rights and division of responsibilities, including those on data protection for those processing data.
- 3.5.2 Learners and staff are made aware which organisation carries legal responsibility for delivery or support of defined sections of the blended learning provision.
- 3.5.3 Arrangements for quality management in general are consistent with the Core Statutory QA Guidelines for all providers and topic- or sector-specific guidelines as appropriate.
- 3.5.4 Where one provider offers a programme that aims to enhance or provide additional (usually face-to-face) support for online programmes offered by a different provider, the relationship between the two providers is made clear to all stakeholders, including any requirements regarding technical compatibility or technology protocols. Responsibility for the effectiveness and quality assurance of such complementary provision rests with the providers.

## 4 PROGRAMME CONTEXT

---

The focus of this section is on the key issues and principles of good practice in providers' responsibility for assuring quality in the design, development, delivery and evaluation of programmes and modules that include blended learning. In this context, programmes and modules are processes offered by providers in blended learning mode, by which learners achieve knowledge, skill or competence, irrespective of duration, level, volume of credit, or accreditation.

Procedures supporting the development and delivery of a blended programme of study partly by online learning will need to ensure that the value of online learning in enabling learners to meet intended learning outcomes is clearly demonstrated.

The curriculum design process should consider the programme structure, coherence and sequencing in a blended learning context with reference to online learning. The teaching, learning and assessment strategies and the delivery mechanisms adopted in online learning are explicitly designed for the online learning context recognising, for example, that learning, teaching and assessment may be asynchronous, that online learners should be empowered to track and check their own progress, learning and achievement (as well as the provider). The quality of learning resources plays a distinctive and critical role in online provision, as highlighted in the *Guidelines for Open Educational Resources (OER) in Higher Education*: "Much of the quality of OER will depend on which resources academic staff choose to use, how they adapt them for contextual relevance and how they integrate them into various teaching and learning activities."<sup>3</sup>

### 4.1 Programme outcomes

**The programme as a whole is intended to achieve learning outcomes. Online learning is effectively integrated into the programme for this purpose.**

---

<sup>3</sup> *Guidelines for Open Educational Resources (OER) in Higher Education (UNESCO/Commonwealth of Learning 2015)*, p. 9.

Procedures in place include:

- 4.1.1 Learning and teaching practices that are informed by best practice in blended and online provision. Subject-specific and educational scholarship informs the pedagogy and instructional design.
- 4.1.2 Curriculum content and student support accommodates enhancement or updating. For example, in response to feedback or other quality assurance mechanisms. All online content is subject to approval and to ongoing quality assurance. Resource planning at programme level includes a budget for updating of content to ensure it remains current. Programme teams are alert to the cost implications in designing online delivery mechanisms. Programme structure, coherence and sequencing is considered as part of the regular evaluation and feedback.
- 4.1.3 Assessment strategies with opportunities for learners to engage in formative assessment activities that will check and reinforce learning remotely.
- 4.1.4 Curriculum development teams with an appropriate representation of subject, educational technology, instructional design and other key internal stakeholder expertise. For example, specialist student support advisers and administrators, library and information professionals play significant roles in effective online learning as well as the teaching staff who will support learners.
- 4.1.5 A focus on the delivery of an interactive learning experience for each module delivered online and academic content appropriate to the programme. Pedagogy informing learning and teaching is demonstrably learner-centred.
- 4.1.6 Individuals developing online learning modules use the platform the institution has committed to and are bound by the institutional policies, systems, hardware and processes for online learning.
- 4.1.7 Planned and controlled opportunities exist for staff to test new or evolving technologies not currently supported by the existing policy or provider platform.

## *4.2 Learning resources, materials and delivery mechanisms*

**Learning resources, materials and delivery mechanisms are appropriate, fit-for-purpose, monitored and reviewed.**

Procedures ensure that:

4.2.1 All materials and media (for example audio-visual, printed or digitised assets) that are used to deliver online learning are subject to informed peer comment at one or more draft stages and allow for the incorporation of feedback into subsequent and final versions of the learning resources. Such informed peer review may be both internal and external, and enable commentary to be made on both academic content and pedagogical approach. The aim is to ensure that:

- ~ The materials produced are of sufficient quality.
- ~ The different media used are integrated so that they support and complement each other in enabling learners' achievement of the stated learning outcomes.
- ~ Programme design is learner-centred and provides a consistent and accessible experience for all learners.
- ~ All modules of a programme are owned by an academic department. This involves online learning even when some modules or sections are outsourced.
- ~ There is clarity in the information provided to learners and staff about communication channels and the availability of advice and support, for example, communication must manage learner expectations on communication and availability of staff in the provider. What learners may reasonably expect is specified. For example, expectations of staff and learners on developing any meta skills as part of engaging with the online aspects of the blended learning programme.
- ~ The whole learning environment for blended learning used in conjunction with the learning resources requires active engagement by the learners. Learners can test and monitor their progress at appropriate points.
- ~ The relationship between the materials and other components of learner support activity such as face-to-face tutorials and residential schools is defined.
- ~ Protocols and information are provided to learners and staff on the use of the full range of online engagements and forums in their learning.
- ~ There are nominated academic/professional moderators who understand and have the authority to intervene in, for example, cyber bullying that may constitute risk to learners and/or the provider.

## 4.3 Approval and programme validation processes

**Approval and validation processes for blended learning programmes including online learning modules are appropriate and fit-for-purpose.**

Procedures in place include:

- 4.3.1 A robust programme development process designed for online learning that includes explicit consideration of, for example:
- ~ Staff qualifications and experience in relation to online learning.
  - ~ The use to be made of external consultants and experts in online provision, including in critical review and appraisal of draft learning resources.
  - ~ Arrangements for the induction and continuing professional development (CPD) for staff involved in a) the development and support of online resources; b) online teaching, where such experience is lacking; c) support services for learners.
  - ~ Testing of delivery mechanisms for online modules or parts of modules. For example, confirming that (where appropriate) it is possible to access learning on a private computer or on a mobile device or other as appropriate.
- 4.3.2 Processes to establish sustainable timescales and planning for resources including:
- ~ Early confirmation of staffing resources. If the programme is dependent on local tutors for support, confirmation will need to be provided at an early stage to determine a demonstrable local supply of appropriate staff, and the criteria for their appointment.
  - ~ Timescale for subsequent development and approval of online sections and associated learning resources at the various levels in the programme, and the identification of the external assessors who are involved (if relevant). The timescale is influenced by factors such as pre-requisites, progression rules, applicable professional or statutory body requirements, and programme flexibility.
  - ~ Programmes are fully designed before being offered to learners.
- 4.3.3 Robust arrangements for the quality assurance of learning resources, the learning environment and other learning resources. Depending on the blend of learning involved,

there is differential focus on the effectiveness and quality of the learning experience. For example, where appropriate that equal QA scrutiny is focussed on learners' engagement with the learning resources as on their engagement with teaching staff. The nature of the learning materials and resources will also be different for online learners. Interactivity and the empowerment of learners to monitor their own progress are requirements for all students but particularly distinctive requirements for online resources.

- 4.3.4 Processes that highlight the availability and timeliness of feedback to learners. While good practice in all contexts, in online modules it is likely to be achieved virtually so that benchmarks and expectations will be different. In many remote contexts, learners will rely primarily on electronic learning resources and library. All of these examples will require quality assurance arrangements to be developed or adapted in order to gather feedback and evidence to demonstrate quality and inform enhancement.
- 4.3.5 Processes for learner records are sufficient, accurately maintained and up-to-date learner records are available for monitoring progression and achievement. They will facilitate timely intervention for online learners who may be struggling. Where learning opportunities are flexible and allow learners to stop and start the programme, the student record arrangements are able to support the level and nature of flexibility that is permitted.
- 4.3.6 Privacy laws on data protection are appropriate for all aspects of online provision. Learners' concerns about the confidentiality of their records are respected. For example, there will need to be appropriate protocols for managing and archiving formal or informal learning conversations between learners or between learners and teaching staff. Learners are made aware of the regulations that will provide them with a unique learner identity to be used by the provider; and those regulations in place to protect learners and indicate their own electronic trail or digital persona.
- 4.3.7 Staff induction processes for staff employed to support or assess learners are in place. Staff are appropriately inducted and trained for their role in online learning. In a face-to-face context, the nature of feedback on assessment might only be partially achieved through comments on a script or written feedback sheet. For those parts of the programme that are assessed through online learning the feedback on assessment is more typically an intrinsic part of the learning and teaching strategy for the programme. There may be other aspects of the assessment process that are distinctive (or at least more prominent) for online learning. For example, it is commonplace in online learning for assessors to assess, grade or mark learner assessment:
- ~ where assignments have been set by someone else
  - ~ submitted and returned electronically

~ from learners they have only met face-to-face on a few occasions throughout the academic year

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 learners. Documentation of best practice examples and exchange of information among all staff is important where there is a growing knowledge base, a growing availability of additional open access resources and constant demands to update ICT skills. Provider support through structured networking is in place to facilitate this.

## 5 LEARNER EXPERIENCE CONTEXT

---

This section relates to key issues and principles in the providers' responsibility for supporting learners, as groups/cohorts and as individuals.

The benefits of flexibility offered by blended learning in general and online learning for learners is balanced by its demands for autonomy, commitment and self-regulation. Procedures are in place to highlight to learners that online learning may differ from their previous learning experience; that they are appropriately prepared for it; and that their progress and engagement is monitored, encouraged and supported. Learners will be enabled to pre-assess their own readiness to engage with online/blended learning programme.

### *5.1 Support available to learners*

**Learners are supported to make informed choices about participating in a blended learning programme and to develop the necessary independent study skills to successfully progress towards becoming an autonomous learner. The level and nature of support available to learners is clear.**

Procedures in place include:

- 5.1.1 Appropriate information for the learner from the provider to understand the online sections of the programme and assess the suitability of a programme. For example:
- ~ prospective learners receive a clear explanation of the blend of learning that they will experience and the realistic commitment required to complete the programme;
  - ~ information on the nature and extent of autonomous, collaborative and supported aspects of learning.
  - ~ information about the hours when academic, technical or pastoral support is available;
  - ~ information on the hardware and software required;

- ~ information on how much time learners are expected to commit to independent learning in order to successfully complete the programme.

The extent to which face-to-face attendance is part of the blend is made clear to learners and/or other stakeholders such as funding or recognition bodies. A service level agreement, or equivalent, is in place.

#### 5.1.2 Clear terms and conditions:

Prior to enrolment on a particular programme, the prospective learner is made properly aware of all terms and conditions relevant to that programme, either in the prospectus or similar material, by correspondence, or in discussion with the provider. This might include:

- ~ any specified timings for synchronous learning or assessment
- ~ deadlines and the consequences of not meeting them
- ~ the rules governing flexibility for learners, such as the regularity of presentation or re-assessment opportunities
- ~ processes in place to protect the provider against fraud, plagiarism or other forms of cheating

5.1.3 Requirements for access; bandwidth and any prescribed hardware or software are appropriate, are communicated well in advance to the learners and all requirements are published.

5.1.4 Processes to ensure the delivery of any study materials direct to learners remotely through, for example, online methods or correspondence, is secure and reliable, and there is a means of confirming its safe receipt.

5.1.5 Deliberate steps taken to assist every learner to understand their responsibility to engage with the learning opportunities provided and to shape their learning experience.

#### 5.1.6 Learners have access to:

- ~ Descriptions of the online components of the blended learning programme, or aspect of study, to show the intended learning outcomes and teaching, learning and assessment methods of the unit or module.
- ~ A clear schedule for the delivery of their online learning study materials, learner support (local and/or remote) and for the submission and assessment of their work. This will include learner responsibilities in this regard.

- ~ Information on the ways in which their achievements will be judged, and the relative weighting of online and other remote parts of the programme in respect of assessment overall.
- ~ Timely formative assessment on their academic performance in the online sections of the programme to provide a basis for constructive individual feedback and guidance.
- ~ Information about the quality assurance processes in place to give confidence that the assessed work conducted through online activity is properly attributed to them.
- ~ Unique identifiers that will enable them to access learning resources in good time at the start of their programme and form part of the validation of their identity. Learners are made aware of all the mechanisms the provider has in place to test and confirm learner identity.
- ~ Appropriate and sufficient learning resources to support online learning and remote study.
- ~ Induction or other support to access these effectively and efficiently (technical and academic support and guidance, as appropriate).
- ~ Identified and available contacts (academic, administrative, technical).
- ~ Information about the intended life-span of all online sections of their programme and the arrangements in place to phase in or out new online or other remote components without disadvantaging learners.
- ~ Appropriate opportunities to give formal feedback of their experience of the programme, including the effectiveness of blended and online learning arrangements.
- ~ (Where appropriate) information about the respective responsibilities of the provider and any third parties – such as local study centres or administrative offices - that may be involved in supporting the provider's online learning.

5.1.7 Learner support for monitoring their own programmes. Every learner undertaking online learning is supported in monitoring their own progression and achievement through the provision of regular opportunities to test their knowledge and understanding, reflect on feedback and engage in dialogue with staff and/or their peers.

- 5.1.8 Appropriate interventions and mechanisms to identify learners who may be struggling with online remote learning. Learners are encouraged to complete their programme. Progress is monitored, and learners are provided with prompt and helpful comments on their progress in relation to learning guidelines and goals.

## *5.2 Equality of opportunity*

**Learning and teaching activities and associated resources provide every learner with an equitable, fair and effective opportunity to achieve the intended learning outcomes.**

Procedures in place include:

- 5.2.1 Teaching and learning resources for online learning, howsoever delivered, that meet the provider's specified expectations. These include equality of opportunity, interactivity and the empowerment of autonomous learning.
- 5.2.2 Mechanisms that monitor and/or moderate standards (both in terms of learner outcomes and teachers and/or assessors' practice). Assessment arrangements conducted through online learning are reliable, secure and provide learners with appropriate confidential feedback on their progress.
- 5.2.3 Arrangements that provide assurance that all those involved in teaching and learning or supporting learning are appropriately qualified, supported and developed to provide effective online learning. This will include the protocols for communication and facilitation of online discussions and other challenges of teaching with technology.
- 5.2.4 Mechanisms that facilitate a safe, accessible and reliable blended learning environment for all learners, promoting dignity, courtesy and respect in their use.
- 5.2.5 Arrangements that make reasonable blended learning alternatives available to learners with disabilities.

## ANNEX 1 GLOSSARY OF TERMINOLOGY

The definitions below are drawn from the available literature, practice and currency. However, since there is some variability in what is understood by some of this terminology, the main purpose of this glossary is to clarify how they are to be understood *in the context of this document*.

Definitions are provided in the order in which terms appear in the document.

**Blended learning:** For the purpose of these guidelines, blended learning is “the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” as defined by Garrison and Kanuka (2004).<sup>4</sup>

**Educational Technology:** The study and ethical practice related to the creation, use and management of appropriate technology for the design and delivery of education – including learning platforms, hardware, software and processes. There may be a range of titles in place to describe this role.

**Massive Open On-line Courses (MOOCs):** An online course made freely available over the internet to potentially large numbers of learners at no charge. There are no entry criteria. MOOCs are not normally credit-bearing.

**Learning resources:** The specific and/or specialist resources made available to learners through which the blended learning course or programme is taught and learning opportunities are facilitated. Learning resources may be in any media such as hard copy, electronic, digital, audio or visual.

**Learning design:** The translation of pedagogical research into the design and testing of curriculum for online learning that is specifically centred on supporting the achievement of learning outcomes. Developing and implementing content (provided by academics) teaching and learning strategies and assessments for effective online learning delivery.

---

<sup>4</sup> Garrison, D.R. & Kanuka, H. (2004). *Blended Learning: Uncovering Its Transformative Potential in Higher Education*. *Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95-105, p. 96.

## ANNEX 2 RESOURCES

Many other quality agencies or bodies internationally have relevant guidelines, benchmarks, or Codes of Practice in place. This document has taken careful account of the work already undertaken and reflects the consensus on the key features of good practice for blended learning. It represents a synthesis of existing guidance and reproduces some of what is already available across a range of existing publications, most notably those publicly available from:

- » [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK \(QAA\)](#)
- » [European Association of Distance Teaching Universities \(EADTU\)](#)
- » [The Open University \(OU\)](#)
- » [The Open and Distance Learning Quality Council \(ODLQC\)](#)

It has been informed by publications from:

- » [British Accreditation Council \(BAC\)](#)
- » [European Standards and Guidelines \(ESG\)](#)
- » [International Council for Open and Distance Education \(ICDE\)](#)
- » A range of accrediting bodies in the United States of America
- » [National Adult Literacy Agency \(NALA\)](#)

And the following publications:

- » *Guidelines for Open Educational Resources (OER) in Higher Education* (UNESCO/ Commonwealth of Learning 2015)
- » Ossiannilsson E, Williams K, Camilleri A & Brown M (2015) *Quality models in online and open education around the globe. State of the art and recommendations*. Oslo: International Council for Open and Distance Education - ICDE
- » Garrison, D.R. & Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended Learning: Uncovering Its Transformative Potential in Higher Education. *Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95-105.