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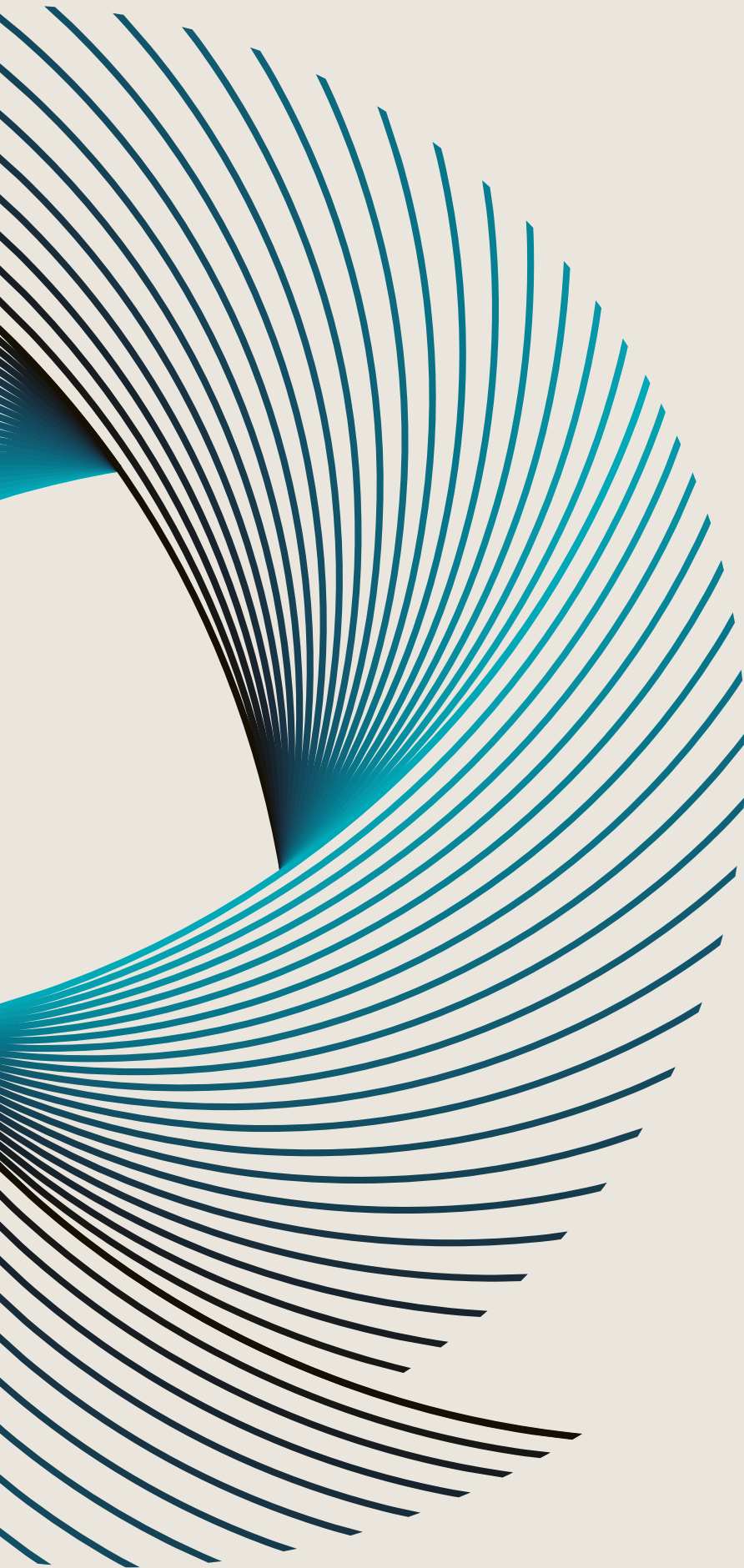
**Topic  
Specific**

Blended and Fully Online Learning Programmes

# Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines

For Providers of Blended and Fully Online Learning Programmes

September 2023/V3 © QQI



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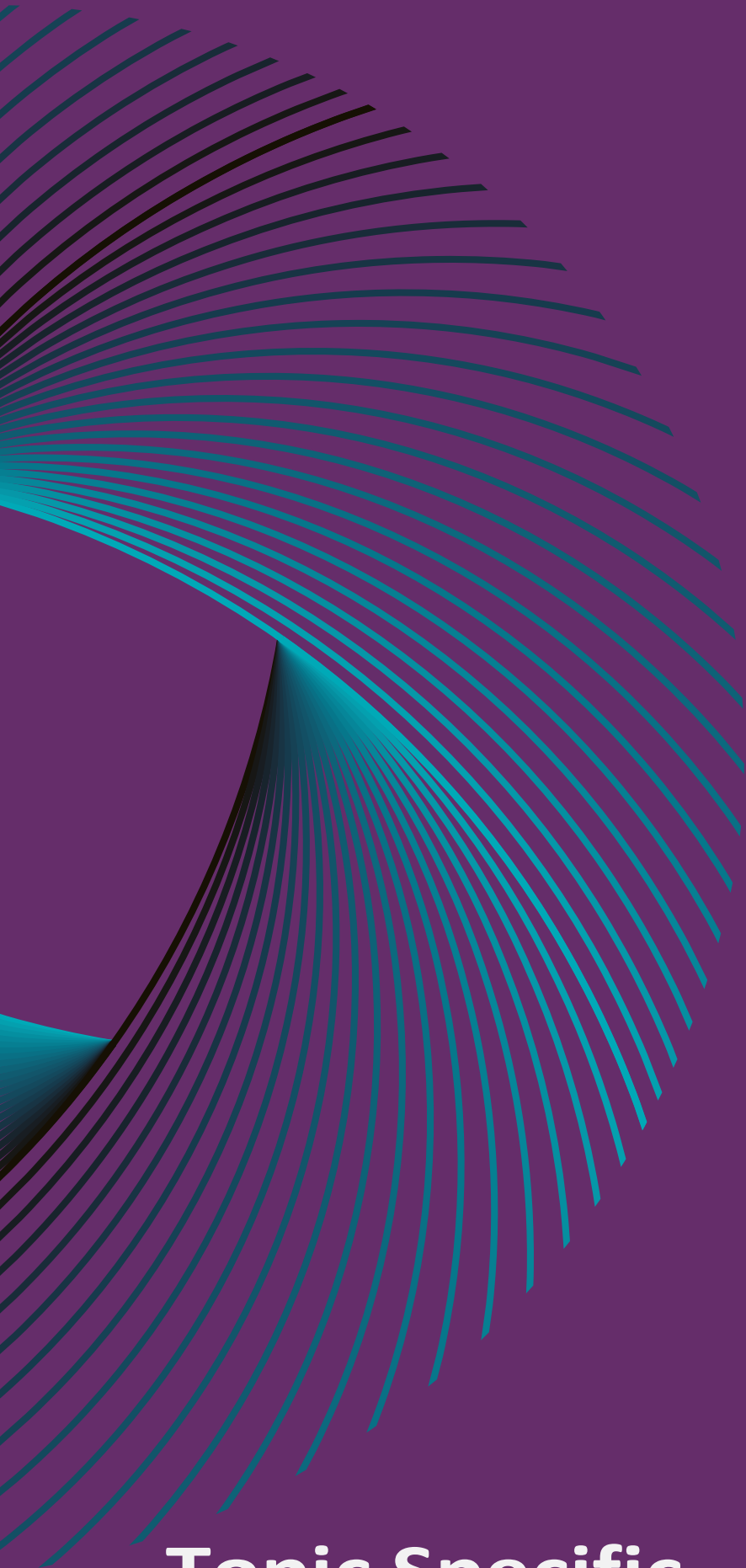
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# Topic Specific Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines

## FOR PROVIDERS OF BLENDED AND FULLY ONLINE PROGRAMMES

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**Topic Specific**

## **GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS**

<b>Artificial Intelligence</b>	No simple definition but generally refers to machine-based systems that can generate content, make predictions, recommendations, or decisions that influence real or virtual environments.
<b>Augmented Reality</b>	An enhanced perception of the real physical world that is achieved through the use of digital visual elements, sound, or other sensory stimuli and delivered via technology.
<b>Asynchronous Online Learning</b>	Learners accessing online materials at their own pace and interacting with their teacher and peers at times that work around other commitments.
<b>Blended Learning</b>	A type of education where teaching, learning and assessment occur using a mix of online and on-site learning with the online components taking place synchronously, asynchronously, or in combination.
<b>Digital Education</b>	A broad umbrella term which encompasses the use of technology to enhance teaching, learning and assessment and is inclusive of blended and online learning.
<b>Electronic Proctoring</b>	A managed system that enables learners to sit online tests and exams using their own computer or one provided for them on a secure browser and webcam where their behaviour is monitored and recorded.
<b>E-portfolio</b>	A collection of work (evidence) stored in an electronic format to demonstrate and showcase learning over time.
<b>Learning Management System (LMS)</b>	The core platform or infrastructure used by providers to support online learning experiences (e.g., Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle, etc.)
<b>Learning Resources</b>	Includes both print and digital materials and may include text, audio, video, animations, simulations and other types of rich media content designed for learning.
<b>Fully Online Learning</b>	A type of education where teaching, learning and assessment occur online, either synchronously, asynchronously, or in combination and where no on-site instruction is required.
<b>Open Educational Resources</b>	Digital materials in any format and medium that reside in the public domain or are under copyright that have been released under an open license, that permit no-cost access, re-use, re-purpose, adaptation and redistribution.
<b>Student Information System</b>	A platform that enables educational providers to digitise and consequently manage learner information and track and record progress more efficiently usually with interoperability to other systems.
<b>Synchronous Online Learning</b>	Teachers and learners gathering at the same time and virtual place and interacting in “real-time”.
<b>Video Conferencing Platform</b>	A tool that facilitates online communication for synchronous video and audio meetings and live online classes (e.g., Teams, Zoom, etc.).
<b>Virtual Learning Environment</b>	A term used to describe the wider digital learning ecosystem of tools and platforms used for learning and that support the LMS.
<b>Virtual Reality</b>	A simulated experience to give the learner an immersive feel of a virtual world

## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

### 1 INTRODUCTION

This document describes quality assurance (QA) guidelines established by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) for all providers of blended and fully online learning programmes of education and training. 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. QQI Policy on Quality Assurance Guidelines recognises that these guidelines will have different application on different providers depending on their scope of activity and their status under the 2012 Act.

These guidelines update and replace those first published in 2018 for blended learning programmes and supplement the QQI *Core Statutory QA Guidelines* first 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 QA of programmes supported by blended and fully online learning study modes.

Commonality or overlap between these guidelines and QQI Core Statutory QA Guidelines, is intended to reinforce the key principle that high quality teaching, learning and assessment, coupled with pedagogically sound programme design and appropriate administration, underpins all modes of programme delivery, including blended and fully online.

These guidelines should be read in conjunction with QQI’s policy on QA Guidelines. i.e. providers of blended and fully online learning programmes, as defined in these guidelines, should also refer to QQI’s other sector-specific and topic-specific QA guidelines as appropriate.

As topic-specific QA guidelines, they supplement and are in addition to the core QA guidelines. They aim to support providers in assuring quality, establishing internal QA procedures, and undertaking quality reviews and continuous improvements.

#### 1.1 Why do we need these guidelines?

The growth of blended and fully online learning continues to challenge many traditional approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. New digital technologies offer providers and teachers alike with more choices about how they design the curriculum, interact with students, develop learning materials, and support learners. Artificial Intelligence (AI) extends some of these possibilities but also introduces new risks and challenges. Similarly, learners are expecting greater flexibility over the way they study. There is a growing worldwide trend towards more part-time online lifelong learners in response to the changing nature of work and the need for continuous professional development (World Economic Forum, 2022)<sup>1</sup>.

Blended and fully online learning is worthwhile when it leads to an enhanced learner experience and promotes the well-being and inclusion of learners. These modes of delivery should complement the central role of the teacher, preserving the social and human dimension of education. Blended and fully online learning should not be a goal in itself or purely motivated by convenience, efficiency, or cost savings. Used effectively, relevant technologies have the potential to enhance educators’ ability to provide high-quality and responsive instruction, increase learner engagement and generate more

<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum (2022). *These 3 charts show the global growth in online learning*. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/01/online-learning-courses-reskill-skills-gap/>



inclusive and equitable learning opportunities. These potential benefits are not automatic, their achievement requires significant investment and pedagogical leadership. These guidelines are intended to inform the development of procedures and practice by relevant providers and awarding bodies interested in using blended and fully online learning arrangements to enhance the quality of programmes. (UNESCO, 2023<sup>2</sup>; OECD, 2023<sup>3</sup>)

Accordingly, Irish education providers are responding to increasing demand for flexibility by developing new programmes and redesigning existing ones to take advantage of blended and fully online teaching approaches. While such flexible programmes support a more agile tertiary education system and create a more diverse range of lifelong learning pathways, the growth of blended and fully online learning raises additional quality considerations. These guidelines are constructed to help providers identify what they need to consider and how they should respond to the rapidly changing digital learning environment. A central rationale for the guidelines is the need to ensure a quality experience for learners as Irish providers seek to harness the potential of new blended and fully online learning models.

## 1.2 What is blended and online learning?

Although well-established as a teaching approach, defining blended and fully online learning is complex. No single-agreed definition of these terms exists in the literature (Brown et al., 2022)<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, a seminal literature review identified 46 definitions of online learning alone (Singh & Thurman, 2019)<sup>5</sup>. Added to the definition challenge is that online learning is often spoken about in the context of many overlapping terms, such as e-learning, blended learning, digital learning, distance learning, flipped learning, and hybrid learning, to name a few. As Irvine (2020, p. 42)<sup>6</sup> observes, “What used to be a simple binary of face-to-face or online has now become so extremely complex that our ability to understand each other is impaired”. A related challenge is that the ever-changing technology landscape makes functional definitions of blended and online learning a moving target.

While major European agencies and international organisations have attempted to define this landscape, their efforts leave gaps, add to the confusing nomenclature, and contribute to the lack of consensus. In the European context, for example, the *Digital Education Action Plan (2020-2027)* (European Commission, 2020)<sup>7</sup> provides no definition of key terms. The subsequent *Framework for Blended Learning* developed by the European Commission (2021, p. 4)<sup>8</sup> states that “Blended learning happens when an educator or learner takes more than one approach to the learning”. This broad definition contrasts with the taxonomy proposed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), where an important distinction is made between blended, hybrid and online study modes (Staring et al., 2022)<sup>9</sup>. The former refers to when teaching takes place fully in-person, whereas hybrid learning involves a combination of online and on-site instruction. While this more nuanced distinction recognises the concept of hybridity and builds on contemporary developments in the field, such as the

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO (2023) *Global education monitoring report, 2023: technology in education: a tool on whose terms? - UNESCO Digital Library*

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2023), *Shaping Digital Education: Enabling Factors for Quality, Equity and Efficiency*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/bac4dc9f-en>.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, M., Costello, E., & Donlon, E. (2022). Digital education as social practice: Major trends shaping online learning futures. *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 3, pp. 455-484, DOI: 10.53227/10380

<sup>5</sup> Singh, V., & Thurman, A. (2019). How many ways can we define online learning? A systematic literature review of definitions of online learning (1988-2018). *American Journal of Distance Education*, 33(4), 289–306. DOI: 10.1080/08923647.2018.1417658

<sup>6</sup> Irvine, V. (2020). The landscape of merging modalities. *EDUCAUSE Review*, 4, 40-48. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/10/the-landscape-of-merging-modalities>

<sup>7</sup> European Commission. (2020). *Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)*. Brussels, Belgium. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>

<sup>8</sup> European Commission. (2021). *Blended learning framework*. Brussels, Belgium. [https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/files/news/framework\\_for\\_blended\\_learning.pdf](https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/files/news/framework_for_blended_learning.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Staring, F., Brown, M., Bacsich, P., & Ifenthaler, D. (2022). Digital higher education: Emerging quality standards, practices and supports, *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 281, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f622f257-en>.



emergence of *hyflex* models of education (Howell, 2022)<sup>10</sup>, the definition does not distinguish blending from more traditional forms of instruction.

These guidelines navigate this confusing terrain by adopting a “big bucket” approach to definitions proposed by Johnston et al. (2022)<sup>11</sup>. This approach acknowledges the complexity of study modes but attempts to keep definitions as simple as possible. The intention is to avoid more complex definition wars as they are largely unproductive, especially when the literature suggests that providers need to develop their own fit-for-purpose definitions that promote alignment at the activity level, the course level, the programme level, and the institutional level (McCarthy & Palmer, 2023)<sup>12</sup>. With this point in mind, the consultation process highlighted the need to strike a balance between existing practices and common understandings that resonate widely throughout the sector while acknowledging more sophisticated definitions and conceptual frameworks proposed in the literature.

Therefore, the revised guidelines build on the previous widely accepted definition of blended learning taken from Garrison and Kanuka (2004)<sup>13</sup>, where, at its most simplistic, this concept refers to the blending of online and face-to-face learning. Such blending involves online components of teaching, learning and assessment taking place synchronously, asynchronously, or in combination. No ratio of blending is specified given an array of possible learning designs. This so-called “big bucket”, which importantly makes no distinction between blended and hybrid forms of learning, contrasts with two other big buckets—namely: i) traditional on-site, in-person<sup>14</sup> teaching and learning; and ii) fully online learning where learners are usually at a distance from the teacher and have no on-site or on-campus requirements. Set against these broad study modes, the following definitions apply to these guidelines.

### Key definitions

- *Blended Learning* refers to a type of programme where teaching, learning and assessment occur using a mix of on-site and online learning, with the online components taking place synchronously, asynchronously, or in combination.
- *Fully Online Learning* refers to a type of programme where all teaching occurs entirely online, either synchronously or asynchronously, or in combination. Importantly, learners can complete their programme of study from a distance with no in-person or on-site requirements.

While not every programme fits neatly into these definitions, as learners can study offline at a distance with no digital technology, and some programmes are taught through more than one study mode, a key distinction appears throughout the guidelines. This distinction recognises that blended learning programmes *always* include an on-site or physical face-to-face component. In contrast, fully online learning programmes can be completed entirely online and from a distance, including in some cases from outside of Ireland. The term *fully* is adopted in the definition of online learning to help amplify this important distinction.

A key assumption underlying the guidelines is that fully online learning programmes, including those delivered 100% synchronously, raise specific quality considerations due to learners being physically

<sup>10</sup> Howell, E. (2022). HyFlex model of higher education: understanding the promise of flexibility. *The International Journal of Learning Futures*, 30(4), 173-181. DOI [10.1108/OTH-04-2022-0019](https://doi.org/10.1108/OTH-04-2022-0019)

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, N., Seaman, J., & Poulin, R. (2022). Defining different modes of learning: Resolving confusion and contention through consensus. *Online Learning Journal*, 26(3), 91-110. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v26i3.3565>

<sup>12</sup> McCarthy, S., & Palmer, E. (2023). Defining an effective approach to blended learning in higher education: A systematic review. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 39(2), 98-114. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.8489>

<sup>13</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. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2004.02.001>

<sup>14</sup> While the term ‘in-person’ is used to help amplify the differences between study modes, it needs to be acknowledged that for learners, fully online learning can feel like a very in-person experience.

separated from their teacher(s) and fellow learners. While learners studying fully online may have the option to voluntarily meet in person, on-site, with peers or teachers, or make use of on-site facilities, this is not normally required to complete their programme of study. Accordingly, the guidelines contain several additional items where fully online learning programmes need to address issues that may impact the quality of provision.

### 1.3 To whom do these guidelines apply?

These guidelines are applicable to all types of providers offering blended and fully online learning programmes leading to awards included within 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 and as amended in 2019. The specific application and use of these guidelines reflects the statutory autonomy of providers and awarding bodies for the development and approval of their internal QA procedures, and varies accordingly::

- Previously established universities must have regard to QA guidelines in the development of their internal QA procedures.
- Other designated awarding bodies, namely the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), the technological universities and institutes of technology, must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by QQI.
- Education and Training Boards, SOLAS and Teagasc must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by QQI.
- Independent or private providers of higher, further, and English language education programmes come voluntarily to QQI to seek approval of their QA procedures or access to QQI awards. Such providers must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by QQI.
- Listed Awarding Bodies come voluntarily to QQI to seek inclusion of awards within the NFQ and must have regard to QA guidelines in the development of their own QA procedures.
- Associated providers must have regard to relevant QA guidelines prior to approval of their QA procedures by a listed awarding body.
- Linked providers must have regard to QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by a designated awarding body.

As set out in the QQI *Core Statutory QA Guidelines*, quality assurance procedures include provision for engagement with external partnerships and second providers. Quality assurance procedures cover all such arrangements, including sub-contracting of provision, research or other partnerships in programme or research provision or related services both at home and abroad as appropriate.

Providers offering programmes supported by blended or fully online learning that is neither credit-bearing nor leading to an award included within the NFQ, are encouraged to be guided by the expectations and quality considerations captured here. The guidelines may help to mitigate the risk of reputational damage, especially when offerings are available to learners outside of Ireland. Thus, these guidelines serve a statutory requirement and aim to support good practice and a positive experience when programmes are blended or fully online, with quality assurance, improvement, and enhancement in place.

## 1.4 What is the purpose, scope and relevance?

These guidelines serve two purposes. Firstly, they have a statutory role. Secondly, they provide guidance to providers on the quality assurance and quality enhancement of blended and fully online learning where learners, for part or all their programme of study, may be physically distant from:

- Other learners
- Teachers and assessors
- The provider institution
- Learning resources and support services

Providers will have regard to the guidelines to inform the establishment (including amendment) of their quality assurance procedures for blended and fully online programmes. It is anticipated that such procedures will be proportionate to the nature, scale and complexity of their programmes or future aspirations. This point recognises that not all the guidelines will be applicable to all institutions, especially smaller providers, and those with relatively few blended or fully online offerings.

These guidelines are to be used:

- By providers when establishing, developing, implementing, evaluating, maintaining, or reviewing quality assurance procedures for blended learning programmes involving a combination of on-site and online study.
- By providers when establishing, developing, implementing, evaluating, maintaining, or reviewing quality assurance procedures for fully online programmes involving learners who are physically separated from their teacher(s) and peers.
- As a basis for the approval, as required, by QQI of a provider's internal QA procedures.

These guidelines are not intended:

to prescribe **how** providers are to design, deliver and administer blended and/or fully online learning programmes or how they establish their internal QA procedures. Rather, education providers operating in Ireland are expected to have internal systems of quality assurance for programmes supported by blended or fully online learning that are appropriate to their individual contexts and include procedures to successfully monitor the effectiveness of those systems.

In so far as possible, these guidelines focus on what is distinctive about blended and fully online learning contexts and what additional quality considerations apply when learners have the flexibility of studying online. The guidelines result from a comprehensive review of the European and international literature on quality assurance models and frameworks for blended and fully online learning programmes and incorporate many suggestions gathered through stakeholder consultation. Appendix 6.1 describes how the guidelines were developed, the consultation process over almost 12 months, and the literature that informs their design.

These guidelines replace QQI's guidelines for blended learning but no other QQI QA guidelines. They complement other QQI QA guidelines and reflect European quality assurance norms and expectations. For example, they broadly align with and build on existing European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education et al. (2015), *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, [http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG\\_2015.pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf).

and have regard to the *International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education* specific to online and blended modalities, short learning programmes and cross-border education (International Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2022)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> International Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education. (2022). *International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education*. <https://www.inqahe.org/sites/default/files/INQAAHE-International-Standards-and-Guidelines-ISG.pdf>

## 2 CONTEXT

These guidelines come at a time of rapid change. Digital technology is continuing to transform many aspects of our daily lives. Our ways of living and learning routinely involve using our mobile devices to search and locate relevant online information. If you want to shop, pay your bills, or stay in touch with family and friends, then the basic ability to use new digital technology is crucial to active participation in society. Everyday billions of people worldwide have become accustomed to using social media as an essential source of information and communication tool.

Education and training are no different. There are very few programmes which do not employ digital technology and the internet in some way. Those in which at least some of the teaching, learning and assessment happens where the learner is remote from the instructor, are blended and so should be supported by application of these guidelines.

### 2.1 How is the education landscape changing?

Over the last decade, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), have attracted millions of learners to thousands of free online courses. The COVID-19 crisis was a watershed moment for online learning as providers rapidly pivoted to emergency remote teaching and assessment. This once-in-a-lifetime experience has put a greater spotlight on the quality and effectiveness of online learning. Often lost in comparisons to traditional teaching methods was an appreciation that online learning is not a single entity; it has many different variations—just as on-site teaching differs from large lectures to small tutorials and hands-on labs.

As already mentioned, the global pandemic added fuel to growing demand from learners for greater flexibility over the way they learn. Responding to this increasing demand adds further complexity to the learning design process, the most appropriate approaches to teaching and assessment, the best types of learning resources and related QA procedures. For example, the practice of video recording lectures has become increasingly common so that learners can view them at their own pace and place. However, a UK review of blended learning by the Office of Students (2022)<sup>17</sup> raises serious quality concerns about the accessibility of these recordings and wider questions concerning the currency and recycling of digital resources.

AI applications add another dimension to the changing landscape. While “EdTech” has a long history of hype, hope and disappointment (Gouseti, 2010)<sup>18</sup>, providers have many new opportunities available to them. Still, there are genuine concerns about academic integrity, platform solutionism and the place of digital technology in human learning. Against this backdrop, the guidelines balance the possibilities of new learning futures with the risks and additional quality considerations. The underlying premise is that the fundamental principles of a quality learning experience remain largely the same. However, a related premise is there are specific quality issues for programmes with an online component that providers must consider beyond core QA requirements.

Therefore, the guidance here focuses on the QA of programmes supported by online delivery. As with all types of programmes, the expectation is that providers will look for the most effective and efficient means to support learners in achieving intended learning outcomes. Such provision often

<sup>17</sup> Office of Students. (2022). *Blended learning and OfS regulation*. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/blended-learning-and-ofs-regulation/>

<sup>18</sup> Gouseti, A. (2010). Web 2.0 and education: Not just another case of hype, hope and disappointment? *Learning, Media and Technology*, 35(3), 351-356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2010.509353>

requires a mix of teaching, learning and assessment strategies, including some online learning components.

## 2.2 What are the common features of blended learning programmes?

While blended learning can take many forms, the defining feature involves a programme of study which involves a combination of online and on-site learning experiences. The blended aspect of the experience may include:

- On-site face-to-face tuition where teachers use digitally prepared presentations, class polls and other digital tools to engage learners.
- A Learning Management System (LMS) which forms the core of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) designed to support online discussion, digital learning resources, tests and quizzes for formative and summative assessment, and course administration.
- A Video Conferencing System that supports online synchronous learning and consultations with teachers and small group discussions with peers.
- Access to an electronic textbook and/or the provider's digital library resources that can be accessed remotely and seamlessly through the LMS/VLE.
- A dedicated IT platform that supports the recording and playback of digital audio and video, which usually integrates with the LMS/VLE.
- Links to Open Educational Resources (OERs) freely available through the Internet, which are regularly shared during on-site classes and through the LMS/VLE.
- A platform typically integrated into the LMS/VLE that facilitates development of and access to an e-portfolio for critical self-reflection and formative assessment.
- Learning activities and assessment tasks that require or encourage students to use a wide variety of digital tools to successfully meet the learning outcomes.
- Assessment submitted, often checked for originality and academic integrity through specialist platforms, then marked and returned to learners with feedback through digital technology.
- Student support and development services that enhance learner success, including online resources for writing, mathematics, career advice, etc.

Additionally, some blended learning programmes may incorporate virtual labs, language apps, online simulations, augmented reality experiences and electronic proctoring for summative assessment and final examinations. There are many other possibilities. The important thing is that as providers look to innovate and pilot new digital tools, they also evaluate them to ensure they contribute to a quality blended learning experience.

The fundamental principle is that blended learning needs to be done purposefully and is not an addition that merely builds another expensive educational layer without 'adding value' to the learning experience.

The level of blending may vary from shallow to deep embeddings of digital tools and resources, with either small or large numbers of learners. Similarly, the online component may form a small or substantive part of the overall experience, depending on the context, type of learners and intended learning outcomes. Some practical programmes or subject disciplines may not lend themselves to a substantial online experience. For this reason, the proportions of online and on-site teaching, learning and assessment should be clearly stated and understood by all

stakeholders. There is no single recipe to the design of a quality blended learning programme, which is why the guidelines offer indicators of good practice rather than a simple cookbook of solutions.

## 2.2 What are the common features of fully online learning programmes?

With the obvious exception of the on-site elements, all the features of blended learning are also found in fully online learning programmes. While the teaching component of a fully online learning programme may be nothing more than weekly live synchronous classes, a richer and more comprehensive experience is usually supported by the provider's LMS. The LMS should also enhance the learning and assessment components.

These guidelines anticipate the LMS will continue to play an important role in the wider VLE in the foreseeable future.

Any core online learning platform within the VLE must be GDPR compliant and will usually integrate with the provider's other systems, particularly the Student Information System (SIS). Industry standard cybersecurity measures should be in place for all core online platforms to minimise business continuity risks and protect learner data.

Examples of how learning will take place fully online should be available before learners decide to study. Learners should have reasonable expectation of what study involves. A fully online learning programme will usually begin with a virtual welcome or orientation. Resources should be available to support learners to develop their digital skills and learn how to be an effective online learner. Providers may also offer additional learning support and development services targeted to the needs of fully online learners, including those with disabilities. While opportunities may be available to meet teachers and peers at the provider's site or campus, these will be voluntary and should not be required to meet programme learning outcomes.

The research literature is unequivocal that well-designed fully online programmes based on the principles of good practice do not require on-site interactions and can be as good as or even better than traditional teaching methods (Martin, et al., 2022)<sup>19</sup>.

The crucial factor in terms of quality is not the study mode but rather the learning design and related support services. A quality experience, irrespective of the study mode, requires an intentional focus on the most appropriate learning design, teaching methods, learning resources and assessment strategies to support learner cohorts and the intended programme learning outcomes.

It follows that benchmarks and quality indicators designed for traditional on-site provision are not usually fit-for-purpose in a fully online learning context and need to be adapted. For example, indicators related to teaching preparation time, number of contact hours, utilisation of physical learning spaces, frequency of library visits, opening hours for student services, engagement in placements, access to clubs, sporting and other extracurricular activities may not be relevant in making judgements about the quality of fully online learning programmes. However, learners should have the assurance that their study mode and service provision is of full equivalency to any other in providing the opportunity to meet the learning outcomes.

<sup>19</sup> Martin, F. Sun, T., Westine, C., & Ritzhaupt, A. (2022). Examining research on the impact of distance and online learning: A second-order meta-analysis study. *Educational Research Review*, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2022.100438>



### **2.3 Why guidelines rather than prescribed standards?**

Quality assurance arrangements must reflect the diversity of provision in the national education and training system and adapt to a dynamic national and international environment. Thus, a set of minimum or prescribed standards for blended and fully online learning programmes would be too narrow and would not future-proof current and emerging practice. The good practice principles underlying these guidelines recognise a variety of contexts and provide a reference point rather than a recipe to inform, benchmark and enhance the design of blended and fully online learning experiences. They indicate quality considerations across a broad spectrum of providers and recognise that programmes with an online component can take many different forms. Context is crucial to how providers design, implement and evaluate programmes using these guidelines.

## SECTION 2: THE GUIDELINES

### 3 STRUCTURE

These guidelines have been developed on the premise that quality assurance is most effective when providers take responsibility for it themselves (QQI, 2016)<sup>20</sup>. The primary responsibility for quality lies with providers and their teaching, administrative and professional support staff. Thus, responsibility for quality needs to be owned, shared, and distributed right across the provider. Of course, providers also need to work closely with learners as partners in their own learning and in consultation with industry, professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and community stakeholders.

Importantly, these guidelines recognise that quality assurance serves different purposes. On the one hand, it ensures statutory compliance, offers public accountability, and provides some safeguards for learners and employers, as required by QQI. On the other hand, these guidelines have been constructed to help support providers in their commitment to quality enhancement and continuous improvements. They seek to support a mutually reinforcing cycle of quality in the ongoing development of programmes supported by blended and online delivery.

It follows that a second key premise is that quality assurance is not a “tick box” exercise. Accordingly, beyond statutory requirements, providers can use the guidelines to help *guide*, *monitor*, and *enable* the continuous improvement and fit-for-purpose provision of blended and fully online learning programmes. In this respect, there is no end point in defining quality, especially given ongoing developments in technology-enhanced learning continue to redefine the art of the possible.

A third underlying premise is that quality assurance needs to be multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. For this reason, the good practice indicators that follow recognise that a continuous quality assurance loop needs to consider inputs, processes, resources, and outputs. Accordingly, these guidelines address each of these overlapping and mutually connected aspects of quality assurance. They particularly encourage providers to give increased attention to outputs in their commitment to quality enhancement.

#### 3.1 How are the guidelines structured?

These guidelines and the related good practice indicators for blended and fully online learning programmes are structured around three contexts. They support a multi-layered approach that builds on the structure of the previous *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes* (QQI, 2018)<sup>21</sup>. Accordingly, the guidelines are organised under the following headings:

- Organisational context
- Programme context
- Learner experience context

The *Organisation Context* recognises the importance of leadership, quality management, relevant policies and regulations, staff training and professional development, and the provision of fit-for-purpose infrastructure in the provider’s context. There is also an important domain focused on quality issues for learners outside of Ireland. There are six domains:

- Strategy, management, and implementation plans

<sup>20</sup> Quality and Qualifications Ireland. (2016). *Policy in quality assurance guidelines*. <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/qp-10-policy-on-quality-assurance-guidelines.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Quality and Qualifications Ireland. (2018). *Statutory quality assurance guidelines for providers of blended learning programmes*. <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/Statutory%20QA%20Guidelines%20for%20Blended%20Learning%20Programmes.pdf>

- Policies, regulations, and administrative processes
- Finances, infrastructure, and resources
- Staff training, professional development, and institutional support
- Strategic collaborations and partnerships
- Learners outside of Ireland

The *Programme Context* focuses on the approval processes and the curriculum design. It considers the programme structure, coherence, sequencing, learning materials, teaching and assessment methods, and evaluation strategies to enable a quality learning experience. It contains six domains:

- Programme outcomes
- Approval and validation processes
- Learning and curriculum design
- Learning materials and resources
- Assessment and feedback practices
- Evaluation and continuous improvement

The *Learner Experience Context* addresses the importance of support, promoting high levels of engagement and equality of opportunity. Notably, it includes several additional quality assurance considerations from those in the previous guidelines. This section reflects an even stronger focus on the learner and the quality of their learning experience in programmes supported by blended and fully online provision. There are four domains:

- Thinking about study
- Learning support and development
- Equality of opportunity
- Learner experience and outcomes

Each context begins with a brief ‘Scoping Statement’, and each domain provides a ‘Good Practice Statement’ followed by a series of good practice considerations that might need to be in place.

Importantly, not every provider is expected to have every quality procedure, as this depends on the programme and institutional context.

The guidelines under each domain balance as much as possible the level of detail or specificity required for robust quality assurance procedures, with the additional time, resources and burden of proof placed on providers. While comprehensive, the guidelines do not address every possible quality consideration that emerged from the literature review or during stakeholder consultations. To do so would result in an even longer set of guidelines, which for some providers, would be unrealistic to apply or implement in practice.

### 3.2 What specific quality considerations apply to fully online programmes?

These guidelines assume that most quality considerations and related good practice indicators apply to all programmes which support a flexible learning experience. This assumption is supported by an analysis of the relevant literature undertaken in developing the guidelines.

However, this research also revealed several specific quality considerations that providers who offer fully online learning programmes need to consider under each context, such as access; readiness; digital skills; the mix of synchronous and asynchronous delivery; the design and development procedures for approving and updating learning materials; the accessibility of learning resources; the arrangements for student support, development and guidance; academic integrity; and learners who reside outside of Ireland.

Therefore, where relevant, 10 quality considerations specific to fully online learning programmes appear under the three contexts and related domains. They are clearly shown in the table format through an indented row under the relevant good practice indicator listing specific quality assurance considerations. The tables also include some cases where quality assurance considerations for fully online learning differ from those for blended learning programmes.

## 4 DOMAINS AND PROCEDURES

This section introduces the domains and good practice quality assurance considerations for each of the contexts.

### 4.1 Organisational context

The focus of this first section is on the strategic and institution-wide aspects of managing quality for blended and fully online learning programmes, including strategy, policy and administrative processes, technical infrastructure and training and professional development requirements for developing appropriately skilled personnel.

At the organisational level, it is necessary to demonstrate an understanding of the distinctive demands that blended and fully online provision will make on infrastructure and systems that differ from traditional face-to-face contexts. Where the nature of high-quality blended and fully online delivery is not adequately understood, a programme originally designed for an on-site learning environment may be poorly adapted for learners. For example, teaching staff with limited knowledge or online learning experience will fail to appreciate the pedagogical opportunities and challenges as fully. Learners will not generally have a good experience if they receive lectures, learning resources, and other activities originally designed for on-site delivery which are reused online without being redesigned and refined for that purpose and context .

Providers have a responsibility to create conditions for a good learning experience. The potential reputational risks of not doing so are significant. Fully online learning providers should be particularly mindful of using learner-centred approaches, which support active learning, rather than merely delivering digital content to a cohort of geographically dispersed learners. Accessibility must be considered, as many fully online learners are known to choose this mode of study due to disabilities or specific learning needs<sup>22</sup>.

IT infrastructure and administrative systems originally designed for on-site teaching contexts are unlikely to be fit-for-purpose for blended or fully online learning programmes. Specialist, reliable and accessible digital tools and platforms are required for designing, developing, and facilitating online learning. Tracking learner progress and achievement, marking and returning assessments, and providing feedback to learners and assessors are just a few areas where existing policies, systems, and processes may need to be adapted or revised for blended or fully online provision.

Therefore, a decision to offer some or all provisions through blended or fully online learning must be carefully considered and form part of a provider’s vision, supported by an approved and well-funded strategy. The enthusiasm and expertise of a few people should not be the driver for such a decision, although such energy should be harnessed, recognised, and valued. This usually means there needs to be a strategy and plan, clear direction to programme developers and appropriate investment in developing capacity and services to ensure high-quality blended or fully online learning provision offering learners a good experience.

The following tables expand on these points, with six domains related to the Organisational Context level.

<sup>22</sup> See Healy, R. (2022). *Learning from home 2021: A survey of Irish FET and HE students with disabilities learning through COVID-19*. AHEAD. [https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/Learning%20from%20home%20report\\_digital.pdf](https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/Learning%20from%20home%20report_digital.pdf)

<b>GUIDELINES FOR PROVIDERS OF BLENDED AND FULLY ONLINE LEARNING PROGRAMMES</b>	
<b>ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT</b>	
<b>Scoping Statement</b>	<b>The Organisational Context focuses on strategic and institution-wide aspects of managing quality for programmes supported by blended and fully online provision. It establishes whether appropriate procedures are in place for strategy, policies, regulations and administrative processes, finance, infrastructure, resources, training and professional development, institutional support, strategic collaboration, and partnerships, and addressing issues related to learners studying outside of Ireland.</b>
<b>1. Strategy, Management, and Implementation Plans</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>A clear vision, explicit strategy, and well-developed management plans are established to support initiation, development, provision, review and maintenance of blended and/or fully online programmes.</b>
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	1.1. A clear vision and strategic approach to the development of blended and/or fully online learning provision, which aligns with the provider’s mission and shared and widely understood by staff, learners, and other stakeholders.
	1.2. A clear statement of principles / criteria which will inform decision making on the appropriateness of blended or fully online modes for new programme development.
	1.3. Alignment between the provider’s strategy, teaching, learning and assessment plans and implementation plans for blended and/or fully online provision, with appropriate integration into related quality assurance policies and procedures.
	1.4. Accountable key leadership roles, with business processes ownership clearly defined and appropriate structures in place to support blended and/or fully online learning provision.
	1.5. Alignment of blended or fully online programme development plans and processes between institutional level and that of individual units, schools or departments.
	1.6. Use of market intelligence to demonstrate the scale of demand and potential income to ensure the viability and long-term sustainability of proposed blended or fully online programmes.

	1.7	A contingency plan that enables blended and/or fully online learning programmes to continue to be offered to learners with minimal disruption should digital infrastructure fail or experience a serious outage.
	Fully Online Programmes	For fully online programmes, the contingency plan <b>must</b> include consideration of digital channels outside of the provider's normal infrastructure to ensure minimal disruption to teaching, learning and assessment for learners studying at a distance.

2. Policies, Regulations and Administrative Processes		
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>		<b>A clear set of policies, regulations and fit-for-purpose administrative processes address, support and enable good practice for blended and/or fully online learning provision.</b>
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	2.1	Policies, regulations and administration processes that are fit-for-purpose for the provision of blended and/or fully online learning programmes.
	2.2	Approved and published expectations for the quality of blended and/or fully online provision, including LMS/VLE minimum standards, design templates and accessibility requirements for digital materials and learning resources.
	2.3	Programme documents addressing the specific implications for teaching, learning and assessment which arise from the use of synchronous or asynchronous media.
	2.4	Academic and programme regulations that support and recognise the part-time nature of many blended and/or fully online learning programmes.
	2.5	Recruitment and admissions policies and student information systems and related processes that allow learners on blended and online programmes to efficiently register, pay relevant fees and access crucial information.
	Fully Online Programmes	For fully online learning programmes fee structure that are different to that for other programme modes, an explicit fees policy and related processes <b>must</b> be in place which identifies the types of services, procedures and payment arrangements for learners studying at a distance.



	<p>2.6 An explicit workload model for relevant staff that adequately recognises preparation time, goes beyond measuring direct contact hours and supports flexible learning through the substitution of traditional teaching methods with fit-for-purpose online synchronous and/or asynchronous engagement.</p>
	<p>2.7 Arrangements for assuring compliance with any legal or regulatory obligations that are appropriate to the provision of blended and/or fully online provision. For example, this may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• child protection</li> <li>• equity, diversity, and inclusion</li> <li>• intellectual property and copyright</li> <li>• clear parameters on data protection including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)</li> <li>• applicable professional or statutory body requirements</li> <li>• local regulatory considerations in the context of transnational provision</li> </ul>
	<p>2.8 Effective relationship management enabling timely and efficient response to learners' enquiries, administrative requests and resolution of appeals and complaints.</p>
	<p>2.9 Assessment policies, protocols and administrative processes that provide a secure, confidential, and reliable means for submitting work to be assessed with confirmation of receipt, and explicit, equitable and fair arrangements for the timely marking, monitoring and return of feedback.</p>
	<p>2.10 An Academic Integrity policy that helps to educate staff and students about ethics and the importance of properly attributing their work to original sources, with resources available to understand the risks of engaging in academic malpractice, contract cheating and AI-generated written texts and products, especially for learners known to be vulnerable to such practices.</p>
	<p>2.11 Robust arrangements in place to confirm the identity of learners, such as multi-factor identity verification to help mitigate against fraudulent practices, attempts to gain unfair advantage, or academic malpractice.</p>
	<p>2.12 Electronic proctoring platforms used to administer examinations and other summative assessments that are governed by clear policies and protocols and meet ethical and privacy requirements, with learners fully informed of how their data will be stored, managed, used, and deleted. Learners are also informed as to how they are to work with the proctoring platforms.</p>

	2.13	A consistent approach and online survey that is used to allow learners to regularly evaluate the quality of their blended and/or fully online learning experiences. The aggregated findings and proposed actions arising from such evaluations are shared with learners.
	2.14	A dedicated unit, service or person responsible for managing, coordinating, and revising the provider's quality assurance procedures in response to new developments in blended and/or fully online provision so they continue to be fit-for-purpose.
	2.15	Quality assurance procedures are in place across the provider where relevant performance data informs regular reports, cyclical reviews, and institutional self-assessment of blended and/or fully online learning provision.

<b>3. Finances, Infrastructure and Resources</b>		
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>The level of financial investment, type of IT infrastructure and available resources build capacity and enable good practice for blended and/or fully online learning provision.</b>	
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	3.1	The provider's strategy or implementation plan includes appropriate investment in infrastructure and allocates sufficient funding and resources to ensure a quality blended and/or fully online learning programme.
	3.2	Robust costing models which consider the additional costs associated with IT infrastructure, depreciation, and replacement of equipment, developing, and updating learning resources, induction, training and support for staff and learners engaged in blended and/or fully online learning provision.
	3.3	A planned approach to the procurement of services and IT infrastructure which meets appropriate tender requirements, includes a clear policy for approval of exceptions, and follows robust selection processes.
	3.4	The infrastructure and IT resources required to support the provision of good quality blended and/or fully online learning are understood, planned, integrated, interoperable and routinely monitored and evaluated.
	3.5	A fit-for-purpose Student Information System (SIS) that helps to maintain accurate records and supports the increased flexibility possible through blended and/or fully online learning programmes.
	3.6	A fully supported and fit-for-purpose LMS, which is regularly upgraded and enables the increased flexibility afforded by the design of blended and/or fully online learning programmes.

	3.7	Where appropriate, several other fit-for-purpose digital tools and platforms support the LMS which together form the wider VLE that provides the capacity for quality blended and/or fully online learning provision.
	3.8	Approved digital tools and online platforms are available that ideally integrate with the LMS to enable teachers to record and share videos for asynchronous learning and to host live synchronous lectures, tutorials and workshops.
	3.9	A reliable IT platform or third-party service that is available to check the work produced by learners for potential plagiarism or other breaches of academic integrity.
	3.10	Learners having remote access to the provider’s library, relevant electronic databases, and prescribed textbooks applicable to their programme of study.
Fully Online Programmes		For fully online learning programmes, learners <b>must</b> be able to access remotely the provider’s library, relevant electronic databases, and prescribed textbooks applicable to their programme of study.
	3.11	Secure and reliable mechanisms for the online submission and transfer of learners’ work directly to assessors. There is an institutionally approved and consistent means of confirming the safe receipt of learners’ work.
	3.12	The capacity, currency and life expectancy of the infrastructure is appropriate to support plans and ambitions for blended and fully online learning provision, including the scale of programme offerings and number of anticipated learners.
	3.13	Opportunities are available to pilot and evaluate new digital tools and platforms for teaching, learning and assessment.
	3.14	Any new digital tools and platforms being piloted or implemented have had their reliability and security tested and signed off, with confirmation that appropriate technical support and contingency plans are in place.
	3.15	Institutionally approved transitional arrangements in place to support any migration to new or different IT infrastructure taking account of the need to maintain compatibility with the technology that learners are currently using.
	3.16	All data contained in core IT infrastructure, essential to the provision of blended and/or fully online learning programmes, is backed up with a regularity and frequency sufficient to avoid unreasonable data loss and disruption.

	3.17 Robust cybersecurity and protection measures are in place for all IT infrastructure used to support blended and/or fully online learning programmes. Technical measures are supplemented by regular training, and risk awareness training.
	3.18 Contingency arrangements are in place in the event of IT platform, hardware, or software failures, to restore services for blended and/or fully online programmes as quickly as possible.
	3.19 Effective institutional arrangements are in place to provide assurance that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>platform licensing issues are addressed for technology deployed in blended and/or fully online learning programmes, including any software provided to learners. Jurisdictional issues are considered for learners accessing a programme from outside Ireland.</li> <li>digital tools and online platforms are being effectively used by teachers and those who support teaching, and by learners, as evidenced by learning analytics</li> <li>teaching and learning has occurred, including assessment and feedback and learner evaluation of the blended and/or fully online learning experience at both the module and programme level.</li> </ul>
	3.20 Providers understand and endeavour to minimise the environmental impact of the digital tools and platforms they use for blended and/or fully online learning provision.

<b>4. Staff Training, Professional Development and Institutional Support</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>The availability of relevant staff training and professional development for those who support teaching, learning and assessment and provide administrative and support services is crucial for blended and/or fully online programmes.</b>
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	4.1 The strategies and processes for the appointment, induction, training, professional development, and appraisal arrangements for teachers and support staff are appropriate and specific to blended and/or fully online learning contexts.
	4.2 There is a planned approach to the appointment of (or access to) specialist staff to support the provider’s blended and/or fully online learning strategy, including people with teaching, technical and professional expertise appropriate to integrating new digital technologies in the learning experience.

	<p>4.3 Subject expertise and academic qualifications remain important criteria in recruiting appropriate staff but also such criteria also include competencies required, for example, in designing and facilitating programmes supported by online learning, with an understanding of the pedagogical differences between study modes.</p>
	<p>4.4 The provider has a specialist unit or access to dedicated staffing capable of designing, facilitating, and evaluating appropriate online or on-site training and professional development opportunities to develop digital skills and the capacity to design good quality blended and/or online learning programmes.</p>
	<p>4.5 Staff engaged in teaching programmes supported by digital technologies participate in appropriate training and professional development and have access to mentoring from more experienced colleagues.</p>
<p>Fully Online Programmes</p>	<p>For fully online learning programmes, staff <b>must</b> either demonstrate previous experience of teaching online or participate in appropriate induction, training, and professional development before they facilitate courses, and have access to ongoing support from more experienced colleagues.</p>
	<p>4.6 There is specialist training and professional development for teaching staff and other support personnel on contemporary issues related to blended and/or fully online learning provision, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• accessibility</li> <li>• academic integrity / AI-generated products</li> <li>• effective use of open educational resources</li> <li>• use of digital tools and software applications for content development, media production, video conferencing, virtual simulations, electronic tests etc.</li> </ul>
	<p>4.7 Training and professional development is available for staff managing key infrastructure supporting blended and/or fully online programmes</p>
	<p>4.8 Training is available for all staff and learners to increase awareness of cybersecurity as part of risk mitigation, with stated expectations concerning completion and relevant monitoring of uptake.</p>
	<p>4.9 Staff are aware of available training opportunities and continuous professional development related to blended and/or fully online learning provision. Records of participation are maintained.</p>

	4.11 There is planned collaboration between teaching staff and other support and specialist personnel, such as learning designers, educational technologists, and media production officers, in the process of designing and developing blended and/or fully online programmes.
	4.12 Communities of practice exist either online or on-site for sharing and fostering the pedagogically sound and innovative use of digital technologies for teaching, learning and assessment.
	4.13 A helpdesk service, just-in-time support and informal training are available when teaching staff and other support personnel require assistance in their provision of blended and/or fully online programmes.
	4.14 Examples of good practice along with comprehensive [online] resources are available to support teaching staff and other support personnel in their provision of blended and/or fully online programmes.
	4.15 Awards, promotion criteria and capability frameworks recognise digital skills and efforts to redesign the curriculum and develop teaching methods which harness the potential of blended and/or fully online programmes.
	4.16 There are opportunities for programme staff to engage in relevant research and small innovation projects to learn more about and contribute to the understanding of good practice in blended and/or fully online programmes.
	4.17 There are opportunities for staff to network beyond the provider and engage with external professional bodies and communities that focus on supporting good practice in blended and/or fully online learning provision (e.g., Irish Learning Technology Association, ALT UK, EDEN Digital Learning Europe, European Digital Education Hub).

<b>5. Strategic Collaborations and Partnerships</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>Strategic collaborations and partnerships that advance the institution’s strategy for blended and/or fully online learning provision are quality assured in a manner consistent with QQI’s Core Statutory QA Guidelines.</b>
	5.1 Arrangements for collaboration or partnership as set out in the Core Statutory QA Guidelines recognise any additional risks or responsibilities to be specified for providers and learners engaging in blended and/or fully online learning programmes.

Good practice is supported and reflected by:	5.2	Where a provider is relying on a second provider, collaborator, or consortium of partners to provide parts of a blended and/or fully online programme, that provider's responsibility for quality assurance of the programme is clear to all parties, including staff and learners.
	5.3	Formal written agreements are in place with a second provider(s), collaborators and partners which clearly specify the respective costs, rights and division of responsibilities, including protocols for data protection for those processing data, service provision, quality assurance procedures and dispute resolution arrangements.

6. Learners Outside of Ireland		
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>Where learners reside outside of Ireland<sup>23</sup>, due diligence and risk management arrangements are robust and fit-for-purpose and where teaching methods, student supports and administrative services need to be adapted to the local context, they follow the principles of equity, fairness, and equivalency to ensure all learners can achieve the programme learning outcomes.</b>	
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	6.1	Institutional criteria underpinning development of new fully online programmes address whether or not learners outside of Ireland can enrol and, if so, from which countries.
	6.2	Programmes proposed for validation by an awarding body specify the countries outside Ireland from which learners can be enrolled.
	6.3	Business case, due diligence and risk management arrangements are robust and fit-for-purpose where blended and/or fully online learning programmes target and attract learners residing outside of Ireland.
	6.4	Internal business case requirements consider the viability, scalability, and sustainability of proposed blended and/or fully online learning programmes which aim to attract learners outside of Ireland.
	6.5	Internal business cases and approval processes for blended and/or fully online learning programmes that target and aim to attract learners outside of Ireland address any relevant <i>legal, statutory, or regulatory</i> requirements that apply, including:

<sup>23</sup> For the purpose of these guidelines, 'outside of Ireland' refers to countries outside the Irish State.



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• permission for foreign providers to operate within the local jurisdiction.</li> <li>• definitions of ‘student’ that may impact delivery model and funding streams.</li> <li>• Visa entry requirements for the country in which the face-to-face component of the programme is taught.</li> <li>• due regard to employment law that may inhibit the ability to employ local tutors or use other support functions.</li> <li>• provider’s software or learning resources licences are valid in the local jurisdiction; or other arrangements are in place.</li> <li>• due regard to the location of servers to ensure they meet European and/or local jurisdiction requirements.</li> <li>• due regard to ensure the local jurisdiction intellectual property rights or copyright laws are not compromised.</li> <li>• due regard for regulations that may prohibit the charging of fees or transfer of funds outside of the local jurisdiction.</li> <li>• due regard for local law or expectations of consumer protection that safeguard learners’ interests.</li> <li>• due regard to local financial regulations, taxation issues and risks of fines and sanctions in the case of poor service delivery</li> <li>• requirements for local accreditation or recognition by statutory or regulatory bodies, which may be at programme and/or institutional level.</li> <li>• recognition of qualifications gained that include a component of online learning in the local jurisdiction and related employment prospects and reputation risks.</li> <li>• responsibilities related to the current and relevant Code of Practice for Provision of Programmes of Education and Training to International Learners</li> </ul>
6.6	<p>Internal business cases and approval processes for blended and/or fully online learning programmes that target and aim to attract learners outside of Ireland address relevant pedagogical and support issues that apply, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• restricted Internet access due to poor local infrastructure that may limit the range of online learning experiences and level of teacher interactivity and learner engagement.</li> <li>• restricted Internet access due to local government censorship or blocks placed by employers.</li> <li>• time zones differences that may limit students’ ability to engage in synchronous learning experiences.</li> <li>• cultural considerations that may inhibit group interactions due to gender, religious and other considerations.</li> <li>• ability to complete summative assessments that are proctored either online or in person at a suitable local venue</li> </ul>
6.7	<p>Robustly tested delivery systems demonstrating that learners outside Ireland will have a quality blended and/or fully online learning experience, with access to learning resources, student supports and administrative services equivalent to that available to learners within Ireland.</p>

## 4.2 Programme context

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The section focuses on the key issues and principles of good practice in provider responsibility for assuring quality in the design, development, facilitation, and evaluation of blended and/or fully online programmes leading to awards included within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

Providers' internal approval procedures supporting the design, development, and facilitation of blended and/or fully online learning programmes need to ensure that direct and indirect contact hours offered through synchronous or asynchronous teaching methods, or a combination, reflect the credit value of modules and the programme.

The curriculum design process should consider programme structure, coherence, and sequencing with reference to the most appropriate design to enable learners to meet intended learning outcomes. A learner-centred design reflecting the principles of good practice will recognise the type of learners likely to engage in the programme and adopt active learning approaches to promote student engagement and high levels of interactivity between teachers and learners, and peers.

The teaching, learning and assessment strategies will be explicitly designed for the study mode, the subject discipline, and the intended programme learning outcomes. Accordingly, it should be apparent how the programme is informed by good practice in the design of blended and/or fully online learning provision. The quality of learning resources also plays a distinctive and critical role.

Digital resources should be chosen to ensure alignment with the structure, content and assessment and engage learners through a variety of media, including Open Educational Resources (OER). The time required to engage with learning resources should be calculated as part of the learning design and be proportionate to the credit value. Learners should also be encouraged to search for, critically review and draw on additional resources they find through the provider's online library and/or other electronic databases.

Similarly, assessment design is crucial in meeting the learning outcomes and plays a key role in the overall quality of the learners' experience. Digital technologies create new opportunities for more authentic and collaborative forms of assessment *for* learning, and they can also be used to provide more timely and constructive formative feedback. Therefore, where appropriate, the creative and deliberate integration of digital technology for assessment and feedback should feature in well-designed blended and/or fully online learning programmes.

Recognising learners as important partners in their own learning, they should have regular opportunities throughout the programme to evaluate the quality of their experience. Those involved in teaching blended and/or fully online learning programmes need to engage in cyclical review and evaluation, where relevant data and learning analytics inform continuous improvements. The quality of the programme should be evident from learner success, student evaluation data, retention and completion rates, employer satisfaction and evidence of graduate destinations.

The following tables expand on these points with six domains related to the Programme Context level for blended and fully online learning provision.

<b>PROGRAMME CONTEXT</b>			
<b>Scoping Statement</b>	<p><b>The Programme Context focuses on the programme as a whole and the approval and validation processes. Whether the level, duration, and volume of credit are appropriate, the degree to which learning outcomes are responsive to changing work, industry or community needs and the study mode is fit-for-purpose. It establishes whether appropriate procedures are in place to follow the principles of good practice for blended and/or fully online learning provision with overall coherence and constructive alignment between the learning outcomes and the curriculum design, including the teaching methods, learner interactivity, learning materials and resources, assessment and feedback practices, and evaluation strategies.</b></p> <p><i>These guidelines complement those already in the Core QA Guidelines and existing procedures need to be adapted rather than replaced.</i></p>		
<b>7. Programme Outcomes</b>			
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<p><b>The programme is appropriate to the NQF award type, level, duration, and credit, is responsive to changing work, industry or community needs, and the study mode and sequencing is fit-for-purpose so learners can clearly achieve the intended learning outcomes through blended and/or fully online learning.</b></p>		
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	<p>7.1 The programme meets the provider’s principles / criteria for appropriateness for blended or fully online learning. (Ref. 1.2)</p> <p>7.2 The programme’s duration and credit is appropriate for delivery through the chosen blended and/or fully online mode.</p> <p>7.3 The programme learning outcomes are achievable when learners engage through a blended and/or fully online mode.</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20%; padding: 5px;">Fully Online Programmes</td> <td style="padding: 5px;">For fully online programmes, the learning outcomes <b>must</b> be achievable through this study mode where learners complete all their learning online with no compulsory requirement for on-site teaching or peer interaction.</td> </tr> </table> <p>7.4 The provider’s quality assurance of programme development has incorporated consideration of the use of online learning experiences, with evidence that programme design has been informed by learner-centred principles and an evolving understanding of good practice.</p>	Fully Online Programmes	For fully online programmes, the learning outcomes <b>must</b> be achievable through this study mode where learners complete all their learning online with no compulsory requirement for on-site teaching or peer interaction.
Fully Online Programmes	For fully online programmes, the learning outcomes <b>must</b> be achievable through this study mode where learners complete all their learning online with no compulsory requirement for on-site teaching or peer interaction.		

	7.5 The programme development team includes appropriate representation and enables collaboration between subject matter experts, learning design and educational technology specialists, IT staff, library personnel, learning support and development advisers, and other key internal stakeholder expertise.
	7.6 Programme-level resource planning includes a budget for content development, production of learning resources and materials, and sufficient time for the design, updating and peer review of individual units or modules in the LMS or wider VLE.
	7.7 Information is available to the programme team on institutional policies, systems, and processes for blended and/or fully online learning provision, with relevant approved design templates and any minimum standards that provide consistency in the look and feel of the LMS or wider VLE.

<b>8. Approval and Validation Processes</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>Blended and/or fully online programmes presented for approval and validation processes meet general criteria and also demonstrate that issues specific to the mode have been considered and addressed.</b>
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	<p>8.1 In demonstrating that they meet criteria applicable to programmes leading to awards in the NFQ, blended and/or fully online programmes being proposed for approval / validation will address the issues specific to the mode. i.e.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrate that the programme’s duration and credit are appropriate.</li> <li>• set out the expected proportion of on-site vs synchronous and / or asynchronous teaching and learning.</li> <li>• detail maximum class sizes to manage online interactivity.</li> <li>• demonstrate prior engagement with all key stakeholders and draw on relevant business intelligence.</li> <li>• describe any strategic collaborations or partnerships offering digital services and what agreements are in place to mitigate risks and maintain business continuity, especially when offered outside of Ireland.</li> <li>• describe staff qualifications and experience in the provision of blended and/or fully online learning delivery and arrangements for training and continuing professional development.</li> <li>• describe what digital tools and platforms will be used to facilitate blended and online teaching and learner interactivity and provide access to appropriate digital learning resources and materials.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• describe how the planned curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment strategies reflect learner-centred principles and good practice in blended and/or fully online learning provision.</li> <li>• describe what learning resources and materials will be available and what remote access learners will have to the library and other electronic databases.</li> <li>• describe the synchronous and/or asynchronous teaching methods planned to support teacher-learner and learner-learner interactivity following good practice and learner-centred principles.</li> <li>• confirm that testing of delivery platforms and environments has been undertaken to confirm that it is possible for learners to engage in blended and/or fully online learning, especially if studying outside of Ireland.</li> <li>• indicate how the programme meets and is bound by the provider’s commitments to privacy and data protection laws and safeguard learners’ confidentiality and consumer rights, especially when offered outside of Ireland.</li> <li>• describe mechanisms for verifying the identity of learners throughout their programme of study but particularly regarding assessment, to mitigate risks against fraudulent practices, attempts to gain unfair advantage, or academic malpractice.</li> <li>• identify the academic owner of all modules of the programme, if and when a second provider or collaborator is involved.</li> <li>• describe what policies, procedures and resources are used to promote academic integrity, including mitigation of fraudulent practices and monitoring of AI-generated digital artefacts.</li> <li>• describe what online communication channels will be available for learner enquires and consultations with teaching, professional and administrative staff.</li> <li>• describe what provision there is for learning support and how learners can develop their digital skills and ability to learn how to be an effective online learner.</li> <li>• describe the administrative protocols to accurately maintain records, monitor progression and achievement and offer appropriate interventions for learners who may be struggling or at risk of failure, especially those studying fully online.</li> <li>• identify on-site and/or virtual office hours when teaching staff are available for learner consultations.</li> <li>• describe how the online dimensions of the learning design promote learner engagement and success.</li> </ul>
Fully Online Programmes	For fully online programmes, virtual office hours for learner consultations with teaching staff <b>must</b> consider time zone differences when people are studying outside of Ireland.
Fully Online Programmes	For fully online programmes, approval and validation processes <b>must</b> describe specific strategies designed to foster a strong sense of belonging in the programme of study and institution at large to help reduce the risks of non-completion.

9. Learning and Curriculum Design		
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>The curricula<sup>24</sup> for blended and/or fully online learning programmes follow learner-centred principles and an understanding of good practice that is informed by an explicit learning design model supporting constructive alignment to the intended learning outcomes, with purposeful consideration of the most appropriate and fit-for-purpose teaching, learning and assessment methods, and digital tools and platforms, for supporting high levels of interactivity between learners and the learning environment.</b>	
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	9.1 The curricula for blended and/or fully online learning programmes follow learner-centred principles and an evolving understanding of good practice in the provision of digital education.	
	9.2 An explicit learning design model, approach, or framework for the design of blended and/or fully online learning experiences informs the curriculum with constructive alignment to the programme’s learning outcomes.	
	9.3 ___ An explicit learning design model, approach, or framework for the design of blended and/or fully online learning experiences informs the curriculum with purposeful consideration of the most appropriate and fit-for-purpose teaching, learning opportunities and assessment methods.	
	9.4 ___ The curricula give purposeful consideration of the most appropriate and fit-for-purpose combination of online and on-site teaching methods to support high levels of interactivity between teachers and learners, learners and learners, and learners and their learning resources and materials.	
	Fully Online Programmes	For fully online programmes, the curricula <b>must</b> give purposeful consideration of the most appropriate use and combination of synchronous and/or asynchronous online teaching methods to support high levels of interactivity.
	9.5 The design of live online synchronous classes is structured to engage learners in a variety of activities and promote interactivity consistent with the principles of active learning and learner-centred pedagogy.	

<sup>24</sup> For the purpose of these guidelines, the term ‘curricula’ is broadly defined as the totality of the programme of study, inclusive of the teaching, learning and assessment strategies that contribute to the learner experience.

	<p>9.6 The design of asynchronous content is structured to engage learners in a variety of activities and promote interactivity consistent with the principles of active learning and learner-centred pedagogy.</p>
	<p>9.7 The curricula give purposeful consideration to the most appropriate and fit-for-purpose</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• digital learning materials and resources, including consideration of their accessibility and the potential use of open educational resources.</li> <li>• digital tools and platforms for engaging with teachers and enabling learners to meet the intended learning outcomes.</li> </ul>
	<p>9.8 The curriculum design for blended and/or fully online programmes intentionally calculates the learners' workload, and the allocated study time is appropriate and fit-for-purpose for the NFQ level and award type, programme duration and credit.</p>
	<p>9.9 The learning design process involves a development team with a wide range of expertise and encourages collaboration and constructive peer review by colleagues (and learners) of the planned teaching, learning and assessment methods, the online learning environment, and the learning materials and resources.</p>
	<p>9.10 Administrative information describing the design, structure and sequence of the curriculum includes explicit protocols and expectations for learners on the types of engagement and participation required of them using online synchronous and/or asynchronous tools and platforms.</p>



10. Learning Materials and Resources	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>Well-equipped and supported media production facilities and digital tools are available to develop a variety of fit-for-purpose learning materials and resources<sup>25</sup> and there is appropriate guidance on their effective use, including open educational resources (OER), based on the principles of accessibility and substitution<sup>26</sup>, which are central to good practice for blended and/or fully online learning provision.</b>
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	10.1 There are well-equipped and supported media production facilities and digital tools available to develop a variety of fit-for-purpose learning materials and resources based on the principles of good practice.
	10.2 Teaching staff and those who support blended and/or fully online learning provision are aware of the media production facilities and digital tools available to them and what levels of institutional support they can access.
	10.3 Planning for the development of learning materials and resources includes purposeful consideration of how to integrate a variety of media (print and/or digital) to promote interactivity and active learner engagement, and how they support and complement each other.
	10.4 Teaching staff and those who support the provision of blended and/or fully online learning are aware of and know how to apply the principles of accessibility, as reflected in Universal Design for Learning <sup>27</sup> (UDL), when selecting learning materials and resources.
	10.5 Teaching staff and those who support blended and/or fully online learning programmes are aware of and know how to apply the principles of substitution when selecting learning materials and resources.
	10.6 Guidance is available to teaching staff and those who support blended and/or fully online learning programmes on the effective use of OER, including how to locate, evaluate, acknowledge, and adapt to fit the curriculum, where appropriate.

<sup>25</sup> Learning materials and resources can be in both a print and digital format and may include text, audio, video, animations, virtual simulations, AI-generated artefacts, AR/XR/VR and other types of rich media learning experiences.

<sup>26</sup> The principle of substitution refers to the purposeful replacement of direct teaching time and related learning materials with more engaging, flexible or appropriate digital content, rather than adding to existing teaching methods and resources with no consideration of any increase to the workload and study time for learners.

<sup>27</sup> To read more about UDL, see Jwad, et al., (2022). *Universal Design for Learning in tertiary education: A scoping review and recommendations for implementation in Australia*. <https://www.adcet.edu.au/resource/10814/universal-design-for-learning-in-tertiary-education-a-scoping-review-and-recommendations>

	<p>10.7 Guidance and specialist expertise is available, either within the provider or from outside services, to raise awareness and support the production of new and emerging forms of rich media, such as animations, virtual simulations, AI-generated artefacts, augmented reality experiences, etc.</p>
	<p>10.8 Digital learning materials and resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• are tested for their accessibility for learners who may have slower, less stable, or restricted Internet access, particularly when people are studying fully online in rural locations or from outside of Ireland.</li> <li>• are subject to constructive peer review from colleagues at one or more of the development stages and allow for the incorporation of feedback into subsequent and final versions of media.</li> <li>• clearly indicate to learners the amount of time they should spend engaging with them and whether they are core or supplementary to the curriculum and their success in achieving the intended unit, module and programme learning outcomes.</li> <li>• are subject to approval and ongoing quality assurance and there is a development plan for updating digital content to ensure its currency and relevance based on defined standards or expectations about the length of life expectancy<sup>28</sup>.</li> </ul>

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<sup>28</sup> While the currency and life expectancy of digital learning materials and resources varies depending on the media, typically, provision needs to be made after three years for the renewal or replacement of most digital content.

<b>11. Assessment and Feedback Practices</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>Assessment and feedback practices in blended and/or fully online learning programmes reflect the principles of Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning<sup>29</sup> and involve a variety of formative and summative assessment tasks<sup>30</sup>, which reflect good practice in academic integrity<sup>31</sup> and integrate, where appropriate, the affordances of digital tools and platforms in enabling learners to achieve the intended learning outcomes.</b>
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	11.1 Assessment and feedback practices in blended and/or fully online learning programmes reflect the principles of Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning and involve a variety of individual and/or group-based formative and summative assessment tasks that enable learners to achieve the programme learning outcomes.
	11.2 Assessment and feedback practices in blended and/or fully online learning programmes integrate, where appropriate, the technical and pedagogical affordances of digital tools and platforms in enabling learners to achieve the programme learning outcomes.
	11.3 Assessment and feedback practices in blended and/or fully online learning programmes reflect good practice and value learners as partners in the co-design of assessment, where they have opportunities, if appropriate, to use digital tools and platforms (e.g., e-portfolio) to critically reflect on their progress in achieving the programme learning outcomes.
	11.4 Assessment and feedback practices in blended and/or fully online learning programmes clearly map how formative and summative assessment in individual units or modules of study engage learners in a variety of tasks that contribute to the programme learning outcomes.
	11.5 Assessment and feedback practices for shorter volumes of learning offered through blended and/or fully online learning provision appropriately challenge learners in meeting the learning outcomes and follow the principles of good formative and summative assessment.

<sup>29</sup> This resource hosted by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education explains the principles of Assessment OF/FOR/AS learning. <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/our-priorities/student-success/assessment-of-for-as-learning/#!/Principles>

<sup>30</sup> Generally, formative assessment measures how a learner is learning during their course of study, whereas summative assessment is designed to measure what a student has learned after a unit or course has reached its completion.

<sup>31</sup> To stay abreast of best practice in this area, see resources made available by National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) hosted by QQI. <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/engagement-insights-and-knowledge-sharing/national-academic-integrity-network>

	<p>11.6 Assessment and feedback practices for blended and/or fully online learning programmes adopt consistent protocols for the electronic submission of assessment and the return of feedback to learners.</p>
	<p>11.7 Individual teachers and wider programme team are aware of, bound by and committed to the provider’s regulations, policies and protocols for assessment which ensure security and confidentiality when submitting work, providing feedback to individual learners and for the digital recording of marks or grades.</p>
	<p>11.8 Individual teachers and wider programme team are aware of, bound by and committed to the provider’s regulations, policies, and protocols for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• academic integrity, which have the means and authority to confirm a learner’s assessed work is the original work of that learner only.</li> <li>• the timeliness of feedback to learners following completion of assessment.</li> <li>• ethical and privacy requirements regarding the use of electronic proctoring platforms</li> <li>• informing learners of how their data will be stored, managed, used, and deleted.</li> <li>• the moderation of assessment</li> </ul>
	<p>11.9 The programme integrates the provider’s resources designed to promote a high level of academic integrity and raises awareness and educates students about ethics, the risks of practices such as plagiarism, contract cheating and the use of AI-generated products, especially for learners known to be vulnerable to such practices.</p>
	<p>11.10 Learners on blended or fully online programmes have the same information on assessment, including regulations, marking criteria, deadlines etc. that they would be given if taking the programme on-site. This information format and content will be appropriate to the mode.</p>
	<p>11.11 The programme assessment timing and synchronising considers factors such as cultural or religious calendars and for learners studying outside of Ireland is cognisant of different time zones.</p>

<b>12. Evaluation and Continuous Improvement</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>Evaluation and continuous improvement strategies for blended and/or fully online learning programmes are systemic and cyclical, drawing on data from multiple sources, with clear evidence of how they inform future actions and development plans to enhance the quality of the curriculum to increase learner engagement, interactivity, and success.</b>
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	12.1 The programme team are aware of, bound by and committed to the provider’s regulations, policies and protocols for evaluation and continuous improvement, with strategies to ensure systemic and cyclical review.
	12.2 The programme team are aware of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• what learning analytics data are available to them and how they are to be accessed</li> <li>• how to appropriately interpret this information for evaluation and continuous improvement to enhance the quality of the curriculum and increase learner engagement, interactivity, and success.</li> <li>• how they can monitor learner engagement, retention and completion rates and respond with appropriate supports and interventions, especially for at risk learners and those studying fully online programmes.</li> <li>• provider’s regulations, policies, and survey instruments for learners’ evaluation of the quality of individual units or modules of study which contribute to the programme</li> </ul>
	12.3 Procedures are in place to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• share interpretative analysis of learners’ evaluation data with programme staff.</li> <li>• share and report back to learners the aggregated results of their evaluation of individual units or modules of study and proposed changes or enhancements arising from such feedback.</li> <li>• share among the programme team(s) examples of good practice arising from evaluations to build a growing knowledge base of what works and why in blended and/or fully online learning contexts.</li> <li>• include, where appropriate, as part of the evaluation process a person with specialist knowledge of good practice in blended and/or fully online learning provision.</li> </ul>
	12.4 The programme team is committed to programme-wide evaluation on a cyclical basis that gathers learner, graduate, employer, and other stakeholders’ satisfaction data to inform enhancements and future development plans.

	<p>12.5 Members of the programme team can engage in planned and approved pilot initiatives to test, where appropriate, new and emerging digital tools and platforms and other pedagogical innovations to establish their potential to enhance the quality of the curriculum and increase learner engagement, interactivity, and success.</p>
	<p>12.6 Members of the programme team can engage in approved research on some aspect of the programme following appropriate ethical protocols to support continuous improvement and contribute to the wider literature and knowledge base regarding blended and/or fully online learning provision.</p>
	<p>12.7 Members of the programme team have opportunities to engage with colleagues working in other providers and relevant professional bodies and associations to help benchmark and improve their understanding of evolving good practice in blended and/or fully online learning provision.</p>

### 4.3 Learner experience context

This section focuses on the provider's responsibility to support the learner, as cohorts, in groups and as individuals. It recognises that learner success depends on factors beyond what happens in the physical or virtual classroom. The benefits of flexibility offered for learners by blended and/or fully online learning contexts bring with them challenges, including affective and well-being issues influencing retention, progression, and completion, which require fit-for-purpose learning support and development services and resources.

Accessibility is crucial to learner success. Many learners with specific learning needs or disabilities choose to study fully online, and there should be appropriate procedures to help identify and support their needs. Depending on a learner's background, literacy and numeracy requirements, including supporting digital skills, need to be developed as part of or alongside the programme of study. Appropriate interventions and mechanisms to identify learners requiring additional support or who may be struggling should be in place, particularly for fully online learning programmes where students may not have a supportive peer network. Providers should also have procedures or referral mechanisms that enable learners to access career and counselling services where appropriate.

It is important that procedures are in place to inform learners how blended and/or fully online learning may differ from their previous learning experiences; that they are appropriately prepared for it; that they know how to access learning support and development services, and that their progress and engagement is monitored, encouraged, and supported. When thinking about or considering study, learners should be able to pre-assess their own readiness to engage with blended and/or fully online learning provisions. This readiness includes their current skills, previous experience, whether they have adequate access to the Internet and related digital technologies, and their ability to be an effective online learner. It also considers time for study and personal and family circumstances, both crucial factors for learner success in flexible programmes with a significant online learning component.

The level of flexibility afforded to individual learners must be clear in the programme's study conditions. Providers need to ensure the programme is adequately described and there are clear expectations regarding attendance during synchronous activities. Similarly, expectations for learners accessing the institution's LMS/VLE every week should be explicit. It follows that learners must be given clear information on the hours when academic, technical, or affective support is available. This information helps teachers to set clear boundaries for their engagement with learners, especially outside of normal working hours.

Overall, the principle of equivalency<sup>32</sup> is central to supporting online learners as they should be able to access the same quality and provision of academic advice, learning support and development services and well-being resources as students who learn through a more traditional on-site or in-person study mode. This principle should guide decisions about service provision for online learners, with ideally a 'digital first'<sup>33</sup> approach adopted as a defining feature of good practice in well-resourced efforts to promote learner success, high levels of engagement, and foster a strong sense of belonging when studying in blended and/or fully online learning programmes.

<sup>32</sup> In this context, 'equivalency' refers to providing all learners with the same level of access to learning support and development services and well-being resources even though the mechanism of access may need to differ due to the flexible study mode.

<sup>33</sup> In this context, the term 'digital first' refers to thinking about digital service provision as the default option and offering offline services only when they offer a clear advantage over digital provision.

<b>LEARNER EXPERIENCE CONTEXT</b>	
<b>Scoping Statement</b>	<b>The Learner Experience Context focuses on the learner, their choices, and whether the support and development services and related digital resources designed to promote high levels of engagement, learner success and well-being are fit-for-purpose. It establishes whether procedures are in place to ensure learners are adequately informed about the programme and aware of both online and offline learning support and development services available to them, with a particular focus on supporting study readiness, equality of opportunity and positive outcomes for learners based on learner-centred and good practice principles for blended and/or fully online learning provision.</b>
<b>13. Thinking about Study</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>Prospective learners have the appropriate information to make informed choices about whether a particular programme of study is the best fit for them, given the conditions and their personal circumstances when considering engaging in a blended and/or fully online learning programme.</b>
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	<p>13.1 Prospective learners are supported to make informed choices about embarking in a blended and/or fully online learning programme and are aware from the outset of the necessary skills, pre-knowledge, and technology requirements they will need to be successful in achieving the learning outcomes (e.g., level of Internet access and any prescribed hardware or software).</p> <p>13.2 There is a mechanism for learners to test if their Internet access and hardware meets the technological requirements to participate in the blended and/or fully online learning programme.</p> <p>13.3 Prior to committing to a particular blended and/or fully online learning programme, prospective learners are made aware of all the terms and conditions relevant to that programme – ideally in a written form and during discussion with the provider. This information should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• programme fees</li> <li>• rules concerning fee payments and refunds</li> <li>• official documentation required by the provider</li> <li>• eligibility rules for Visa entry, fee waivers and scholarships</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• any specified timings for synchronous interaction</li> <li>• consequences of not meeting assessment deadlines and procedures for appealing results</li> <li>• expectations governing flexibility for learners, such as the regularity of attendance or re-assessment opportunities.</li> <li>• regulations in terms of alleged plagiarism, breaches of academic integrity and rules against fraud or other forms of cheating</li> </ul>
	<p>13.4 Information is available before learners commit to studying that adequately explains the academic requirements of the blended and/or fully online learning programme to help assess its suitability in terms of their goals and personal circumstances. This information in advance of commencing study should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the programme learning outcomes.</li> <li>• admission criteria</li> <li>• NFQ award details – level, class, award type, credits</li> <li>• module list</li> <li>• professional recognition, where appropriate</li> <li>• key dates for the start and end of study</li> <li>• description of the teaching, learning and assessment methods</li> <li>• clarity on the specific level of engagement expected for online synchronous and/or asynchronous elements.</li> <li>• details of any mandatory or voluntary attendance or participation in both live online synchronous and in-person activities</li> <li>• expectations in terms of regularly accessing the LMS/VLE and use of related asynchronous resources.</li> <li>• statement about accessibility of online content and experiences to reassure learners with specific learning needs or disabilities.</li> <li>• amount of time each week learners are expected to commit to independent learning.</li> <li>• outline of the types of assessment tasks and requirements for any collaborative group work</li> <li>• information on how assessment will be submitted and how long it will take to receive feedback.</li> <li>• the ways in which assignment work will be judged and the relative weighting in respect of assessment what quality assurance processes are in place to give confidence in the currency and standing of the programme.</li> </ul>

	Fully Online Programmes	For fully online programmes, information <b>must</b> be available on any mandatory attendance of live synchronous classes and whether learners can equivalently access onsite services such as the provider’s library, writing and/or mathematics support, etc. to help meet the programme learning outcomes.
	13.5	Prior to committing to a blended and/or fully online learning programme, learners have information on the GDPR compliance of the digital tools and platforms they will be expected to use and how their personal data will be used and who has access to it (e.g., LMS/VLE logs that can be used to monitor learner activity).
	13.6	Information is available about any unique identifiers and the related protocols and processes that will form part of the validation of the learner’s identity and enable them to access the LMS/VLE and digital learning materials and resources in good time at the start of their programme.
	13.7	Learners are informed, where appropriate, about any third-party arrangements and the respective responsibilities of each party, such as local study centres or administrative offices, that may be involved in delivering and supporting the blended and/or fully online learning programme.
	13.8	Prospective learners are able to participate in an on-site or online information event where they can talk with experienced advisors who can explain different programmes and what they may reasonably expect when studying in a blended and/or fully online learning context.
	13.9	Learners are able to participate in an on-site or online welcome or orientation event at the start of a blended and/or fully online programme, which restates and provides clarifications as required on the information already supplied.

14. Learning Support and Development		
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>Consistent with the principles of equivalency and digital-first, well-resourced and fit-for-purpose learning support and development services and related resources are available to all learners. They are fully aware of what they can access, both online and offline, and make effective use of them when needed to support their well-being, chances of success and ability to achieve the programme learning outcomes.</b>	
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	14.1 The provider’s learning support and development services and related resources are well-resourced, fit-for-purpose and continually updated in response to changing technology and good practice in service provision.	
	14.2 Learning support and development services for blended and fully online programmes are adaptive and responsive to ongoing learner needs, tailored to the point of need and programme of study and the stage of the study lifecycle.	
	14.3 There is a purposeful mix in the provision of learning support and development services for learners with a strong commitment to digital-first access where there are clear advantages.	
	Fully Online Programmes	For fully online programmes, there <b>must</b> be equivalency in the provision of learning support and development services to ensure equity of access and that learners are not disadvantaged in meeting the learning outcomes from those studying through other modes.
	14.4 Learners are aware of what academic, technical or affective learning support and development services are available, know how and when they can access them (e.g., the hours, times and contact details), and understand the conditions associated with their use, including matters of privacy and confidentiality.	
	14.5 Learners completing shorter volumes of learning through the provision of blended and/or fully online learning are informed and understand whether they can access the provider’s full range of learning support and development services.	
	14.6 Learners are supported from an early stage and throughout the programme to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop critical digital skills and other necessary independent study skills to be effective online learners.</li> <li>• develop their reading, writing, numeracy, and library skills to meet the programme learning outcomes and progress towards becoming successful lifelong learners.</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>understand the principles of academic integrity, including ethical conduct, expectations concerning the correct citation of sources and the use of AI-generated products, and how to appropriately apply them in meeting the programme learning outcomes.</li> </ul>
	14.7 An appropriate range of supports and guidance is available to learners appropriate to the programme context and cognisant of the often-individual nature of the learner’s participation
	14.8 Welcome or orientation events at the start of a programme include explicit information and helpful resources on the different types of academic, technical, and other supports available to learners.
	14.9 Learners have opportunities to participate in [online] drop-in clinics or information sessions to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>help orient them to the library and develop their information literacy skills.</li> <li>familiarise them with core digital tools and platforms and to develop their digital literacy.</li> <li>develop their understanding of academic integrity.</li> </ul>
	14.10 There are strategies and early indicators to identify learners who may be struggling and prompt and fit-for-purpose interventions to support their progress and ability to achieve the programme learning outcomes.
	14.11 There is regular monitoring and reporting on the uptake and effectiveness of learning support and development services, and evaluation data contributes to service enhancements and continuous improvements, which are communicated to learners.

15. Equality of Opportunity	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>Consistent with learner-centred principles, teaching, learning and assessment practices and associated activities and resources provide every learner with an equitable, fair, and realistic opportunity to achieve the intended learning outcomes—irrespective of the study mode.</b>
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	15.1 All learners have an equitable, fair, and realistic opportunity to achieve the intended learning outcomes based on the principle of equivalency.
	15.2 Teachers and those who support teaching have professional development opportunities to learn how to mitigate the risks of unconscious bias when designing the curriculum, engaging with learners, and judging the quality of assessment work.

	<p>15.3 The LMS/VLE and associated digital tools and learning materials and resources are peer reviewed to confirm that every effort has been made to make them accessible to all learners, including those with disabilities and specific learning needs.</p>
	<p>15.4 The online learning environment is safe, with explicit protocols that promote dignity, courtesy, and respect in digital interactions between teachers and learners, with sensitivity to gender, identity, religious, cultural and political beliefs, Indigenous and Traveller community customs, and the circumstances of people who may be refugees or international protection applicants.</p>
	<p>15.5 Learners can display without fear, apprehension, or recrimination different gender pronouns in the online learning environment and when communicating with teachers and fellow learners.</p>
	<p>15.6 There are appropriately trained and nominated online moderators who understand and have the authority to intervene and follow up in cases of cyberbullying or any other kind of cyberharassment that may constitute risk to learners, teachers and/or the provider.</p>
	<p>15.7 There are deliberate steps taken to assist every learner to understand their responsibility to actively engage with the online learning opportunities provided and shape their own learning experience whilst supporting other learners.</p>
	<p>15.8 The timing of live synchronous activities does not restrict learners working or studying outside of Ireland in different time zones from engaging in online learning experiences, and there are explicit protocols for recording and who can view such activities.</p>
	<p>15.9 A clear policy or shared expectation is communicated to learners concerning whether they must be visible with their cameras on during all parts of live synchronous activities, with rules or guidelines concerning acceptable background images.</p>
	<p>15.10 Every learner is supported to monitor their own progress and achievement through regular opportunities to test their knowledge and understanding, reflect on feedback and engage in dialogue with teachers and their peers.</p>
	<p>15.12 There are appropriate protocols to monitor the level of online engagement in blended and/or fully online programmes and follow up strategies in cases where the teacher’s presence or level of interactivity does not meet expected standards.</p>
	<p>15.13 Learners have confidence that constructive feedback provided during regular evaluations of their blended and/or fully online learning experience is acted upon and contributes to continuous improvements.</p>

	15.14 The student body has elected representation at both provider and programme level. They are regularly consulted when establishing policies, procedures, and good practices for the design of blended and/or fully online learning programmes.
	15.15 Learning support and development services are actively promoted to the student body, group or union through appropriate channels, and they are represented in the monitoring of such initiatives, with opportunities to partner with the provider, where applicable, in offering specific services, such as the development of digital skills or academic integrity.
	15.16 Learners are provided with advance information about the dates of planned upgrades or outages to the LMS/VLE and other digital tools and platforms, with enhancements and regular maintenance work deliberately scheduled to minimise any disruptions or disadvantages to study time.

## 16. Learner Experience and Outcomes

<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	<b>Consistent with fostering a culture of continuous improvement, the provider demonstrates a commitment to enhancing the learner experience supported by evidence and strives to promote student success, a strong sense of belonging and the ability and confidence to be effective online learners, contributing to enhanced career prospects and professional outcomes.</b>
Good practice is supported and reflected by:	16.1 There are deliberate steps taken throughout the learning journey to foster the learner’s success, a strong sense of belonging to the provider, the study programme, the related subject discipline, and their ability and confidence as an effective online learner.
	16.2 Progression, retention, and completion data for blended and/or fully online learning programmes, together with achievement data, inform evaluations and serve to benchmark the outputs and quality of the learning experience against other offerings.
	16.3 Learner feedback is collected as part of a regular evaluation cycle and there is a mechanism to benchmark the results with other blended and/or fully online programmes to assess their performance and develop action plans for continuous improvements.
	16.4 Where appropriate, aggregated results of programme-wide evaluations are shared with learners and external industry and community stakeholders to help validate any key trends or areas of concern and to give confidence that the effort taken to provide such data contributes to meaningful dialogue and continuous improvements.
	16.5 Learners are fully aware of the procedures for making complaints when they are dissatisfied with some aspect of their blended and/or fully online learning experience. Every effort is made to resolve such complaints as quickly as possible.

	16.6 Learners who complete a blended and/or fully online learning programme have opportunities to participate in graduate destination or employability surveys to help assess its impact on their development and career trajectory.
	16.7 Industry and community stakeholders who employ learners who complete blended and/or fully online programmes are invited to provide feedback as part of evaluations of its effectiveness as a mode of delivery.
	16.8 The provider is committed to supporting research on the programme to build a culture of scholarship, document what works and why, and contribute more broadly to continuous improvements in the design of blended and/or fully online learning provision.

## **SECTION 3: IMPLEMENTATION**

### **5 Implementing the Guidelines**

These guidelines provide a quality assurance framework for the development and delivery of blended and/or fully online learning programmes. It is important to note that not all the individual guidelines will apply to every provider type as this depends on several factors, including their size, the qualification level, the number of learners, the educational context, and the plans and ambitions they have for future developments.

This section illustrates how providers can use these guidelines in the context of programme approval and validation requirements. It also offers practical guidance on how providers could use these guidelines to self-assess their current state of readiness to offer blended and fully online learning, identifying good practice and opportunities to strengthen practice.

#### **5.1 How can providers use these guidelines?**

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These topic-specific quality assurance guidelines have been developed as a resource to *guide education and training* providers in Ireland seeking to develop and offer high quality blended and fully online learning opportunities. Given rapid and ever-changing developments in digital and online technologies and the potential benefits they offer to teaching, learning and assessment, the guidelines provide a direction of travel rather than prescriptive mandates. Quality blended and fully online learning provision requires careful consideration, significant investment in capacity building and due regard to the unique circumstances and contexts in which it is made available. For this reason, providers are encouraged to identify quality assurance considerations most relevant to their setting and focus on developing tailored procedures and solutions specific to their context.

#### **5.2 How might different providers use these guidelines?**

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These guidelines should be seen as supplementary, they elaborate on many of the existing domains covered by the Core QA Guidelines, which are already addressed in the internal quality assurance procedures of relevant providers. The statutory status and application of these guidelines is set out in Section 1.3.

##### **Providers offering QQI Awards**

Providers intending to offer blended or fully online programmes leading to QQI awards for the first time will be required to first have their quality assurance procedures approved and then to demonstrate the application of the guidelines as part of a validation application.

Where providers already have QQI approval to offer blended programmes and wish to offer fully online programmes, they are expected to review and update their existing quality assurance procedures. The updated procedures for fully online programmes will require approval by QQI.

##### **Other Providers**

Other providers are expected to integrate these guidelines into their existing internal quality assurance procedures as appropriate and subject to their own internal quality assurance governance arrangements. . Universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) may take the opportunity to use these guidelines in the context of demonstrating their ongoing commitment to the European Standards for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education et al., 2015).



HEIs may take advantage of the guidelines to undertake cyclical programme reviews and institution-wide self-assessment of their blended and online provision to promote quality enhancement, benchmarking with other providers and planning for future developments.

### 5.3 How can providers document evidence of their good practice?

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The answer to the above question depends on how providers already engage in quality assurance and how the guidelines mesh with existing procedures. In recognition of this point, the scoping and good practice statements illustrate how the sum of the whole is greater than the individual parts. The intention is that the 16 Good Practice Statements provide a framing point of reference which help providers to respond to the guidelines in a more holistic manner, consistent with a contemporary approach to quality assurance focusing on building a culture of continuous improvement. They help providers keep sight of the bigger picture, especially when some of the specific quality indicators may not apply to them.

While providers have some choice in how they wish to demonstrate their quality assurance procedures are fit-for-purpose for blended and/or fully online learning provision, Appendix 6.2 offers example templates that encourage the collection of narratives and numbers in response to the guidelines. Providers may wish to adapt these templates and use the 'emerging', 'developing' and 'mature' framework to help respond to QQI or other reporting requirements. The crucial point is for providers not to become focused on the level of maturity itself, but to ensure there are clear plans in place, where required, to address gaps and to support ongoing plans and developments in blended and/or fully online learning provision.

## 6 APPENDICES

### 6.1 How were the guidelines developed?

These guidelines were developed through a comprehensive review of the contemporary literature. Several seminal publications informed the guidelines, including a major meta-analysis of the quality literature on online learning (Singh & Thurman, 2019)<sup>34</sup> and an international review of quality assurance frameworks, benchmarking tools and indicators for digital higher education undertaken by the OECD (Staring et al., 2022)<sup>35</sup>. A critical review of 20 different institutional self-assessment frameworks completed by the European Universities Association (Volungevičienė et al., 2021)<sup>36</sup> along with a comprehensive analysis of quality assurance systems in Europe for digital higher education also informed the guidelines (Ubach & Henderik, 2023)<sup>37</sup>. Additionally, the guidelines were informed by several similar initiatives underway or published by other national quality assurance agencies.

Importantly, the final version of the guidelines reflects valuable input and feedback gathered through several stages of consultation. This consultation began with four online listening sessions open to Irish providers, educators, and learners. These sessions occurred over October and November 2022. The core team from the National Institute for Digital Learning (NIDL) at Dublin City University (DCU), contracted to work with QQI in developing the guidelines, also met over this period with several individual groups and providers on request, where they had specific concerns. As the word cloud presented in Figure 1 illustrates, this part of the consultation process identified a diverse range of quality considerations, with the definition challenge and Assessment, Accessibility and Learner Support and Development standing out as key issues. Particular attention is given to these issues throughout the guidelines.

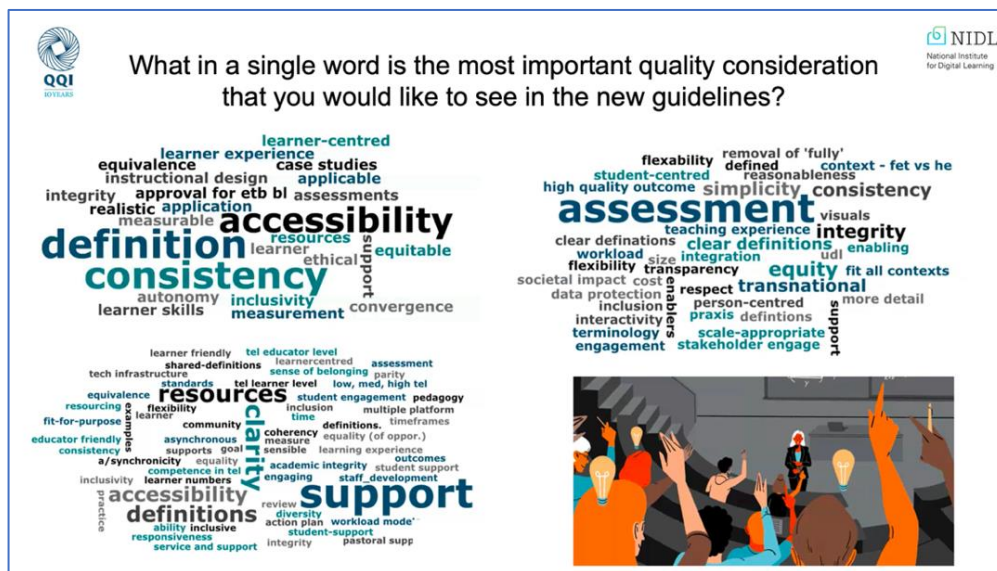


Figure 1. Feedback during stakeholder consultation listening sessions

<sup>34</sup> Singh, V., & Thurman, A. (2019). How many ways can we define online learning? A systematic literature review of definitions of online learning (1988-2018). *American Journal of Distance Education*, 33(4), 289–306. DOI: 10.1080/08923647.2018.1417658

<sup>35</sup> Staring, F., Brown, M., Bacsich, P., & Ifenthaler, D. (2022). Digital higher education: Emerging quality standards, practices and supports, *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 281, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f622f257-en>

<sup>36</sup> Volungevičienė, A., Brown, M., Greenspon, R., Gaebel, M., & Morrisroe, A. (2021). *Developing a high-performance digital education system: Institutional self-assessment instruments*. European University Association, Brussels. <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/digital-research-report.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Ubachs, G., & Henderik, P. (2023). Quality assurance systems for digital higher education in Europe. In: Zawacki-Richter, O., Jung, I. (eds), *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education*. Springer, Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6\\_41](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6_41)

During the development phase of the guidelines, several conference presentations were given to share progress, validate quality indicators and seek feedback from the sector, including papers at the December 2022 *Irish Conference on Engaging Pedagogy*<sup>38</sup>, the January 2023 *EdTech Winter Conference*<sup>39</sup> hosted by the Irish Learning Technology Association (ILTA) and the June 2023 *EDEN Digital Learning Europe Annual Conference*<sup>40</sup>.

QQI directorate staff also provided feedback on two draft versions of the guidelines, which resulted in numerous revisions, including reframing the guidelines around the more contemporary concept of Digital Education and then a subsequent decision following sector-wide feedback to return the focus to blended and/or fully online learning programmes.

In March 2023, a white paper containing the second version of the guidelines was considered by QQI’s Policies and Standards Committee before they were approved for sharing with the sector as part of a second round of consultation. Feedback on this version of the guidelines was gathered through an online survey over three months, with 60 responses from a cross section of providers and stakeholders.

Overall, the feedback gathered through the survey was largely positive, as illustrated in Figure 2. Detailed analysis of the qualitative feedback helped to identify a number of issues, which resulted in significant revisions to the guidelines.

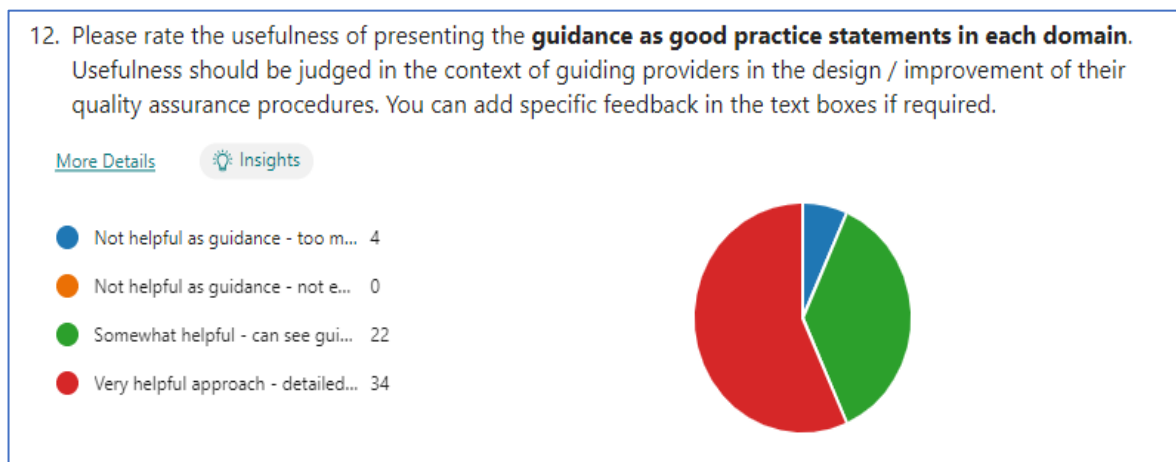


Figure 2. Example of responses to the consultation survey

<sup>38</sup> Brown, M., Costello, E., & Girme, P. (2022). *The quality challenge of digital education: Enabling [tertiary] education providers to make it work*. Paper at Irish Conference on Engaging Pedagogy, Dublin, 8th December.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, M., Costello, E., & Girme, P. (2023). *The quality challenge of digital higher education: How are institutions and national QA agencies responding?* Presentation at EdTech Winter Conference, Irish Learning Technology Association, Dublin 27th January.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, M., Costello, E., & Girme, P. (2023). *Quality is like a box of chocolates: Developing National QA guidelines for digital education*. Paper presented at EDEN Digital Learning Europe Annual Conference, Dublin, 19th June.

## 6.2 How might providers report on the guidelines?

The following examples provide indicative templates that providers may wish to use or adapt when reporting on the *QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended and/or Fully Online Learning Programmes*. Intentionally, the templates refrain from indicating the relative importance of each domain or good practice indicator as the weightings or importance depends to a large extent on the provider’s context. Indeed, identifying the most applicable domains and indicators for an individual provider is an important part of the ‘quality conversation’ and the development of fit-for-purpose quality assurance processes.

To assist with this process, however, providers are encouraged to consider whether their current blended and/or fully online learning provision under each context is at the ‘emerging’, ‘developing’ or ‘mature’ level. While these levels are not precisely defined, they indicate a general maturity or progression of development under each context and related domain. As previously stated, each provider needs to engage with the guidelines and respond in a manner that fits their context, but the five steps outlined in Figure 3 may be helpful in guiding this process.

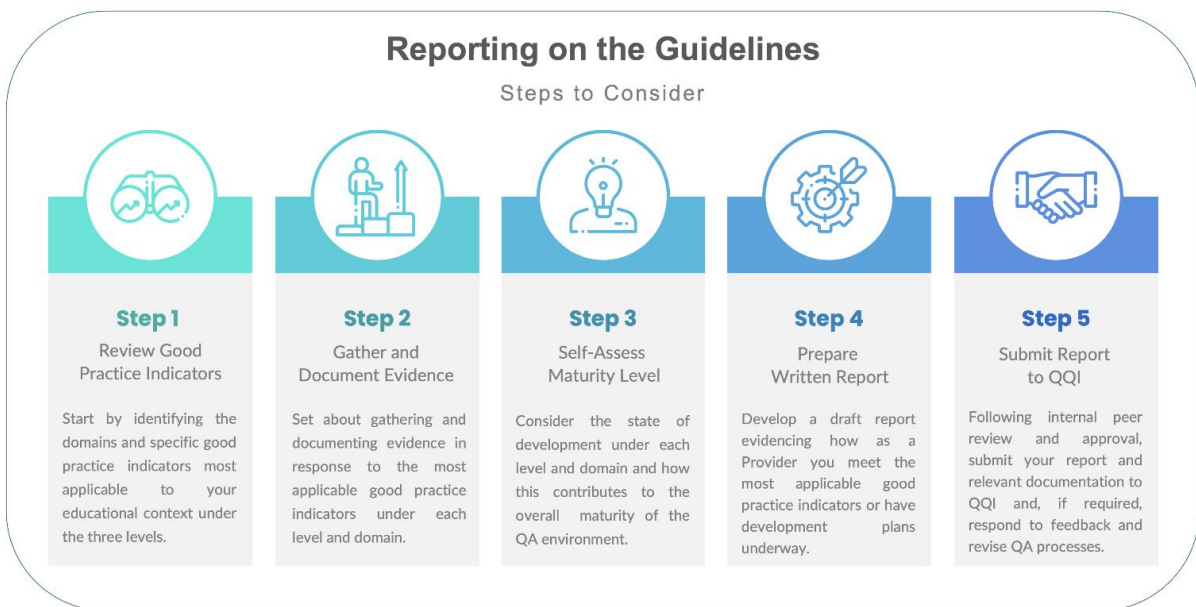


Figure 3. Key steps for engaging with the guidelines

<b>EXAMPLE TEMPLATES FOR REPORTING ON THE GUIDELINES</b>	
<b>ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT</b>	
<b>Scoping Statement</b>	The Organisational Context focuses on strategic and institution-wide aspects of managing quality for programmes supported by blended and fully online provision. It establishes whether appropriate procedures are in place for strategy, policies, regulations and administrative processes, finance, infrastructure, resources, training and professional development, institutional support, strategic collaboration, and partnerships, and addressing issues related to learners studying outside of Ireland.
<b>1. Strategy, Management and Implementation Plans</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	A clear vision, explicit strategy, and well-developed management plans are established to support initiation, development, provision, review and maintenance of blended and/or fully online programmes.
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>	
<b>2. Policies, Regulations and Administrative Processes</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	A clear set of policies, regulations and fit-for-purpose administrative processes address, support and enable good practice for blended and/or fully online learning provision.
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>	
<b>3. Finances, Infrastructure and Resources</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	The level of financial investment, type of IT infrastructure and available resources build capacity and enable good practice for blended and/or fully online learning provision.
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>	

4. Staff Training, Professional Development and Institutional Support		
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	The availability of relevant staff training and professional development for those who support teaching, learning and assessment and provide administrative and support services is crucial for blended and/or fully online programmes.	
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>		
5. Strategic Collaborations and Partnerships		
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	Strategic collaborations and partnerships that advance the institution's strategy for blended and/or fully online learning provision are quality assured in a manner consistent with QQI's Core Statutory QA Guidelines.	
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>		
6. Learners Outside of Ireland		
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	Where learners reside outside of Ireland, due diligence and risk management arrangements are robust and fit-for-purpose and where teaching methods, student supports and administrative services need to be adapted to the local context, they follow the principles of equity, fairness, and equivalency to ensure all learners can achieve the programme learning outcomes.	
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>		
OVERALL SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT		
<b>Emerging</b>	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Mature</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>PROGRAMME CONTEXT</b>	
<b>Scoping Statement</b>	The Programme Context focuses on the programme as a whole and the approval and validation processes. Whether the level, duration, and volume of credit are appropriate, the degree to which learning outcomes are responsive to changing work, industry or community needs and the study mode is fit-for-purpose. It establishes whether appropriate procedures are in place to follow the principles of good practice for blended and/or fully online learning provision with overall coherence and constructive alignment between the learning outcomes and the curriculum design, including the teaching methods, learner interactivity, learning materials and resources, assessment and feedback practices, and evaluation strategies.
<b>7. Programme Outcomes</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	The programme is appropriate to the NFQ award type, level, duration, and credit, is responsive to changing work, industry or community needs, and the study mode and sequencing is fit-for-purpose so learners can clearly achieve the intended learning outcomes through blended and/or fully online learning.
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>	
<b>8. Approval and Validation Processes</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	Blended and/or fully online programmes presented for approval and validation processes meet general criteria and also demonstrate that issues specific to the mode have been considered and addressed.
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>	
<b>9. Learning and Curriculum Design</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	The curricula for blended and/or fully online learning programmes follow learner-centred principles and an understanding of good practice that is informed by an explicit learning design model supporting constructive alignment to the intended learning outcomes, with purposeful consideration of the most appropriate and fit-for-purpose teaching, learning and assessment methods, and digital tools and platforms, for supporting high levels of interactivity between learners and the learning environment.

<b>Provider's Evidence</b>	
<b>10. Learning Resources and Materials</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	Well-equipped and supported media production facilities and digital tools are available to develop a variety of fit-for-purpose learning materials and resources and there is appropriate guidance on their effective use, including open educational resources (OER), based on the principles of accessibility and substitution , which are central to good practice for blended and/or fully online learning provision.
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>	
<b>11. Assessment and Feedback Practices</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	Assessment and feedback practices in blended and/or fully online learning programmes reflect the principles of Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning and involve a variety of formative and summative assessment tasks , which reflect good practice in academic integrity and integrate, where appropriate, the affordances of digital tools and platforms in enabling learners to achieve the intended learning outcomes.
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>	
<b>12. Evaluation and Continuous Improvement</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	Evaluation and continuous improvement strategies for blended and/or fully online learning programmes are systemic and cyclical, drawing on data from multiple sources, with clear evidence of how they inform future actions and development plans to enhance the quality of the curriculum to increase learner engagement, interactivity, and success.
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>	

**OVERALL SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR PROGRAMME CONTEXT**



Emerging	Developing	Mature
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

LEARNER EXPERIENCE CONTEXT	
<b>Scoping Statement</b>	The Learner Experience Context focuses on the learner, their choices, and whether the support and development services and related digital resources designed to promote high levels of engagement, learner success and well-being are fit-for-purpose. It establishes whether procedures are in place to ensure learners are adequately informed about the programme and aware of both online and offline learning support and development services available to them, with a particular focus on supporting study readiness, equality of opportunity and positive outcomes for learners based on learner-centred and good practice principles for blended and/or fully online learning provision.
<b>13. Thinking about Study</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	Prospective learners have the appropriate information to make informed choices about whether a particular programme of study is the best fit for them, given the conditions and their personal circumstances when considering engaging in a blended and/or fully online learning programme.
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>	
<b>14. Learning Support and Development</b>	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	Consistent with the principles of equivalency and digital-first, well-resourced and fit-for-purpose learning support and development services and related resources are available to all learners. They are fully aware of what they can access, both online and offline, and make effective use of them when needed to support their well-being, chances of success and ability to achieve the programme learning outcomes.
<b>Provider's Evidence</b>	

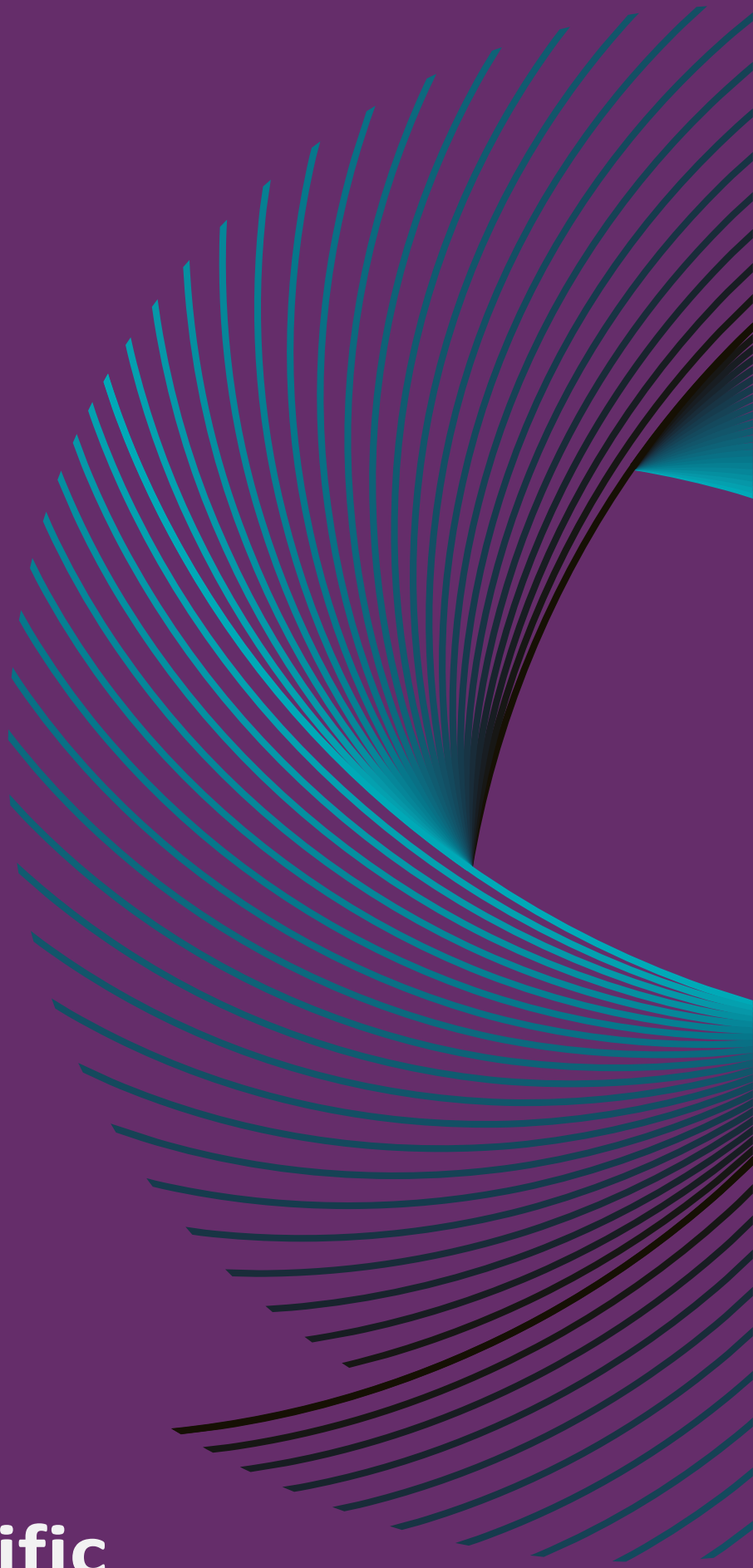
15. Equity of Opportunity	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	Consistent with learner-centred principles, teaching, learning and assessment practices and associated activities and resources provide every learner with an equitable, fair, and realistic opportunity to achieve the intended learning outcomes—irrespective of the study mode.
<b>Provider’s Evidence</b>	
16. Learner Experience and Outcomes	
<b>Good Practice Statement</b>	Consistent with fostering a culture of continuous improvement, the provider demonstrates a commitment to enhancing the learner experience supported by evidence and strives to promote student success, a strong sense of belonging and the ability and confidence to be effective online learners, contributing to enhanced career prospects and professional outcomes.
<b>Provider’s Evidence</b>	

OVERALL SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNER EXPERIENCE CONTEXT		
Emerging	Developing	Mature
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

SUMMARY OF QUALITY ASSURANCE PROVISION ACROSS CONTEXTS				
Context	Summary Statement	Status of Development		
Organisational		<input type="checkbox"/> Emerging	<input type="checkbox"/> Developing	<input type="checkbox"/> Mature
Programme		<input type="checkbox"/> Emerging	<input type="checkbox"/> Developing	<input type="checkbox"/> Mature
Learner Experience		<input type="checkbox"/> Emerging	<input type="checkbox"/> Developing	<input type="checkbox"/> Mature
<b>Overall Summary</b>		<input type="checkbox"/> Emerging	<input type="checkbox"/> Developing	<input type="checkbox"/> Mature

<b>OVERALL SELF-ASSESSMENT OF SPECIFIC QUALITY CONSIDERATIONS FOR FULLY ONLINE LEARNING PROGRAMMES</b>		
<b>Domain</b>	<b>Good Practice Indicator</b>	<b>Evidence Statement</b>
1. Strategy, Management, and Implementation Plans	1.8 For fully online programmes, the contingency plan <b>must</b> include consideration of digital channels outside of the provider’s normal infrastructure to ensure minimal disruption to teaching, learning and assessment for learners studying at a distance.	
2. Policies, Regulations and Administrative Processes	2.6 For fully online learning programmes with a different fee structure, an explicit fees policy and related processes <b>must</b> be in place which identifies the types of services, procedures and payment arrangements for learners studying at a distance, including costs and refunds for Springboard+ courses, Special Purpose Awards, and transnational offerings.	
3. Finances, Infrastructure and Resources	3.10 For fully online learning programmes, learners <b>must</b> be able to access remotely the provider’s library, relevant electronic databases, and prescribed textbooks applicable to their programme of study.	
4. Staff Training, Professional Development and Institutional Support	4.5 For fully online learning programmes, staff <b>must</b> either demonstrate previous experience of teaching online or participate in appropriate induction, training and professional development before they facilitate courses, and have access to ongoing support from more experienced colleagues.	
7. Programme Outcomes	7.2 For fully online programmes, the learning outcomes <b>must</b> be achievable through this study mode where learners complete all their learning online with no compulsory requirement for on-site teaching or peer interaction.	

8. Approval and Validation Processes	8.22 For fully online programmes, virtual office hours for learner consultations with teaching staff <b>must</b> consider time zone differences when people are studying outside of Ireland.	
	8.23 For fully online programmes, approval and validation processes <b>must</b> describe specific strategies designed to foster a strong sense of belonging in the programme of study and institution at large to help reduce the risks of non-completion.	
9. Learning and Curriculum Design	9.4 For fully online programmes, the curricula <b>must</b> give purposeful consideration of the most appropriate use and combination of synchronous and asynchronous online teaching methods to support high levels of interactivity.	
13. Thinking About Study	13.4 For fully online programmes, information <b>must</b> be available on any mandatory attendance of live synchronous classes and whether learners can equivalently access onsite services such as the provider’s library, writing and/or mathematics support, etc. to help meet the programme learning outcomes.	
14. Learning Support and Development	14.3 For fully online programmes, there <b>must</b> be equivalency in the provision of learning support and development services to ensure equity of access and that learners are not disadvantaged in meeting the learning outcomes from those studying through other modes.	



**Topic Specific**



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