

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

For the purpose of these guidelines, blended learning is “the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” as defined by Garrison and Kanuka (2004).¹ These guidelines are constructed to support blended learning programmes; typically these are face-to-face programmes which incorporate remote online learning via a virtual learning environment. As blended learning will always include a face-to-face element, these guidelines are not intended to cover programmes where learning is fully online.

1.1 To whom do these guidelines apply?

These guidelines are applicable to all types of providers providing blended learning programmes leading to awards recognised 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. The legal context varies between providers as follows:

- Previously established universities and the National University of Ireland (NUI) are recognised as autonomous and must have regard to QA guidelines in the development of their internal QA procedures.
- Other awarding bodies, namely the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and institutes of technology, must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by QQI.

¹ 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.

- 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 providing blended learning 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.
- Linked providers must have regard to these 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 of all blended learning that is credit-bearing and/or contributes towards an award of QQI or another state awarding body are required to have regard to these guidelines. Providers offering blended learning that is neither credit-bearing nor leading to an award recognised within the NFQ, are advised to be guided by the expectations and good practice captured here. This may mitigate the risk of reputational damage. Thus, these guidelines should also inform the development of other less formal kinds of blended learning, which may constitute a learner's first interaction with an online learning approach. It is important that the teaching and learning experience is a positive quality experience, with quality assurance, improvement and enhancement in place.

1.2 Purpose, scope and relevance

These guidelines provide guidance to providers on the quality assurance and enhancement of blended learning where learners, for part of their programme of study, may be physically remote from:

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

Providers will have regard to the guidelines in this document to inform the establishment (including amendment) of their quality assurance procedures for blended learning. It is anticipated that such procedures will be proportionate to the nature, scale and complexity of their blended learning or their aspirations.

These guidelines are to be used:

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

These guidelines are not intended:

- to cover any programmes where the sole connection between the provider and the learner is online learning where there is no face-to-face contact.
- to prescribe **how** providers are to operate blended learning programmes or how they establish their internal QA procedures. Rather, providers are expected to have internal systems of quality assurance for programmes with blended learning and related services that are appropriate to their individual contexts and include mechanisms that successfully monitor the effectiveness of those systems.

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

2 **CONTEXT**

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

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

1. Online learning resources developed for online delivery
2. Access to learning technologies such as virtual learning environment
3. Tools to support virtual learning and off campus learning– virtual learning spaces and discussion and other forums to support students
4. Online activities to support formative and summative assessment
5. Face-to-face tuition
6. Assessment submitted, marked and returned to learners with feedback through electronic or other media

Benchmarks and indicators designed for face-to-face provision are not always fit-for-purpose in an online learning context and need to be revised as appropriate. For example, indicators related to teaching (contact time), accommodation (classrooms) or physical library facilities and buildings may not be appropriate in making judgements about aspects of online learning and provision.

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