

### 3 ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

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

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

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

A decision to deliver some or all provision through blended learning should therefore be a considered one and form part of a provider's vision, supported by an approved strategy. The enthusiasm and expertise of a few people should not be the driver for such a decision, although such enthusiasm and expertise can be harnessed, recognised and valued. This usually means there needs to be a strategy and plan, an appropriate investment of time, money and other resources to develop capacity and resources to deliver high quality blended learning that will offer learners a consistent, enjoyable and effective learning experience.

#### 3.1 Strategy and planning for blended learning

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

Procedures are in place to ensure:

3.1.1 That a strategic approach to the use of blended learning is explicit and is shared with staff, learners and other stakeholders. A strategic plan includes appropriate investment in infrastructure and contingency arrangements to support all options for blended learning in an online context. Accountable key roles have been identified. A strategic plan for online learning should be clearly linked (or incorporated into) the institution's overall education/teaching

and learning strategy, and it should be widely understood and appropriately cross-referenced with other key institutional policies, strategies and plans. Approaches to online learning taken by individual units are in line with institutional plans. Approved strategies and implementation plans are clear about the provider's aspirations in relation to blended learning.

3.1.2 Policies, regulations and processes (including administration) are fit-for-purpose in the context of blended learning. The relevance of existing arrangements originally designed for face-to-face provision may not always be appropriate and/or effective in the blended learning context. Examples include:

- online developments that are subject to business case approval for viability and sustainability
- robust costing models which take into account the additional costs associated with IT support; developing and updating learning resources; induction, training and support for staff and learners
- proposals where market intelligence demonstrates that the scale of demand and income will ensure viability and sustainability
- recruitment and admissions policies and processes that allow for any online requirements
- clarity in any additional registration arrangements deemed necessary by the provider
- appeals and complaints policies and processes which accommodate remote learning
- fees policy and processes which take note of online provision
- arrangements for online assessment including pre-assessment, the conduct of assessment and marking/grading which are robustly tested and invoke confidence
- regulations and arrangements for Boards of Examiners and external examiners which include any additional consideration of online learning experiences

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

- Staff engaged to support online learners can either demonstrate previous experience of online provision or are provided with appropriate induction and training.
- There is a planned approach to the appointment of (or access to) specialist staff to support the provider's blended learning strategy. For example, specialist staff with academic, technical or professional expertise in the pedagogy/assessment appropriate to online learning and in educational technology.

- There is planned close collaboration between the academic and other support personnel and specialist staff, such as teams involved in designing learning technologies and other methodologies supporting online learning.
- There is a planned approach to staff guidance of online learners on any open education resources referenced including any intended or unintended endorsement of such resources.

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

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

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

3.1.5 Processes are fit-for-purpose in the case of learners located outside Ireland. Regulations and institutional processes that are appropriate in the face-to-face context can be a challenge in the blended learning or online learning context, including those governing Boards of Examiners/Results Approval Panels and external examiners; appeals and complaints; and student disciplinary arrangements.

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

## 3.2 Infrastructure and resources

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

Procedures in this context include:

3.2.1 A planned approach to the procurement of services (e.g. cloud services), hardware and software to support online learning and a clear policy on a common platform for approval of exceptions.

3.2.2 Contingency arrangements in the event of platform, hardware or software failures.

3.2.3 Robust and consistent systems and processes across the organisation to manage the submission, receipt, marking and return of assessments. There are robust arrangements in place across the organisation to confirm the identity of remote learners and mitigate against fraudulent practices, attempts to gain unfair advantage, or academic malpractice. For example:

- all systems and processes used are capable of:
  - verifying the identity of learners;
  - guarding against cheating, plagiarism or other kinds of unfair advantage;
  - being reliable and scalable in the context of the provider and the strategic plan;
  - timing and synchronizing assessment to take into account factors such as cultural or religious calendars and provision that is offered across different time zones.

3.2.4 A student record system designed or adapted to support blended learning programmes and learners and their quality assurance.

3.2.5 Effective institutional arrangements to provide assurance that:

- Any blended learning elements of provision have had the reliability of their delivery systems tested and signed off in advance, with confirmation that appropriate technical support and contingency plans are in place.
- Intellectual property rights and software licensing issues are addressed in the development and delivery of online learning.
- The delivery system for each online section/unit of study is fit-for-purpose, for example, with a clear statement of:
  - resources needed to complement any online technology
  - how the technology is to be used by teaching and other personnel involved both individually and collectively
  - how it is to be used to confirm that the teaching and learning has occurred, including assessment and feedback for each individual programme
- The availability and life expectancy of the technology is appropriate to the nature of the blended learning provision, numbers of learners and duration of programmes.
- Institutionally approved transitional arrangements are in place to support any migration to new or different technology (hardware or software), taking account of the need to maintain compatibility with the technology that learners are using.

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

### 3.3 Published expectations on blended learning

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

Procedures in place:

- 3.3.1 Make available benchmark or specification documents for learning resources and information specific to monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of learning resources and the learning environment. These are all considered as part of a programme validation and review process.
- 3.3.2 Include assessment practice and process that are published and provide consistent, equitable and fair arrangements for the setting of, marking of and return of feedback on assessment tasks. Learners are provided with consistent, secure and reliable means for submitting work to be assessed and confirmation of receipt. There are institutional regulations and protocols to ensure confidentiality and security in feedback to individual learners on assessment, and for the recording of marks or scores.

### 3.4 Learners outside Ireland

**Where the online learning element is to be offered to learners based outside of Ireland, due diligence and risk management arrangements are robust and fit-for-purpose.<sup>2</sup>**

Procedures in place include:

- 3.4.1 Internal approval processes to confirm that any relevant legal or regulatory requirements (e.g. in each jurisdiction) have been met. For example:
- requirements for local accreditation or recognition by statutory or regulatory bodies, which may be at programme and/or institutional level

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this document "outside of Ireland" refers to countries outside the State.

- permission for foreign providers to operate within the local jurisdiction (if required)
- cultural considerations that may inhibit group interactions, for example between different religious groupings or synchronous delivery of content where gender considerations are required
- regulations that may prohibit or inhibit the charging of fees
- other jurisdictional requirements that may influence the blend of learning permitted

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

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

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

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

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

### 3.5 Collaboration and other partners

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

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