

4 PROGRAMME CONTEXT

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

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

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

4.1 Programme outcomes

The programme as a whole is intended to achieve learning outcomes. Online learning is effectively integrated into the programme for this purpose. Overall programme design is informed by best practice in curriculum design.

Procedures in place include:

- 4.1.1 Learning and teaching practices that are informed by best practice in blended and online provision. Subject-specific and educational scholarship informs the pedagogy and instructional design.
- 4.1.2 Curriculum content and student support that accommodates enhancement or updating, for example, in response to feedback or other quality assurance mechanisms. All online content is subject to approval and ongoing quality assurance. Resource planning at programme level includes a budget for the updating of content to ensure it remains current. Resource implications need to be fully considered as part of the approval process. Programme structure, coherence and sequencing are considered to be part of the regular evaluation and feedback.
- 4.1.3 Assessment strategies with opportunities for learners to engage in formative assessment activities that will check and reinforce learning remotely.

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

4.1.4 Curriculum development processes with an appropriate representation of subject, educational technology, instructional design and other key internal stakeholder expertise. For example, specialist student support advisers and administrators, library and information professionals play significant roles in effective online learning as well as the teaching staff who will support learners. Processes enable close collaboration between academic subject specialists and those responsible for online educational technology and/or instructional design in the development and delivery of online provision to ensure that:

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

4.1.5 A focus on the delivery of an interactive learning experience for each module delivered online and academic content appropriate to the unit of study.

4.1.6 Information for individuals developing online learning modules to ensure the use of the platform the institution has committed to and that they are bound by the institutional policies, systems, hardware and processes for online learning.

4.1.7 Planned and controlled opportunities for staff to test new or evolving technologies not currently supported by the existing policy or provider platform.

4.2 Learning resources, materials and delivery mechanisms

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

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

- The materials produced are of sufficient quality.
- The different media used are integrated so that they support and complement each other in enabling learner achievement of the stated learning outcomes.
- Programme design is learner-centred and provides a consistent and accessible experience for all learners.

- All modules of a programme are owned by an academic or training department. This applies to online learning even when some modules or sections are outsourced.
- There is clarity in the information provided to learners and staff about communication channels and the availability of advice and support, for example, communication must manage learner expectations of communication and availability of staff in the provider. What learners may reasonably expect is specified, for example, expectations of staff and learners on developing any meta skills as part of engaging with the online aspects of the blended learning programme.
- Learners can test and monitor their progress at appropriate points. The whole learning environment for blended learning used in conjunction with the learning resources requires active engagement by the learners.
- The relationship between learning materials and other components of learner support activity such as face-to-face tutorials and residential schools is defined.
- Protocols and information are provided to learners and staff on the use of the full range of online interactions and forums in their learning.
- There are nominated academic/professional moderators who understand and have the authority to intervene in, for example, cyber bullying that may constitute risk to learners and/or the provider.

4.3 Approval and programme validation processes

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

Procedures in place include:

- 4.3.1 A robust programme development process designed for online learning that includes explicit consideration of, for example:
- Staff qualifications and experience in online learning.
 - The use to be made of external consultants and experts in online provision, including in critical review and appraisal of draft learning resources.
 - Arrangements for the induction and continuing professional development (CPD) of staff involved in a) the development and support of online resources; b) online teaching, where such experience is lacking; c) support services for learners.
 - Testing of delivery mechanisms for online modules or parts of modules. For example, confirming that (where appropriate) it is possible to access learning on a private computer or on a mobile device or other as appropriate.

4.3.2 Processes to establish sustainable timescales and planning for resources including:

- Early confirmation of staffing resources. If the programme is dependent on local tutors for support, confirmation will need to be provided at an early stage to determine a demonstrable local supply of appropriate staff, and the criteria for their appointment.
- Timescale for subsequent development and approval of online sections and associated learning resources at the various levels in the programme, and the identification of the external assessors who are involved (if relevant). The timescale is influenced by factors such as pre-requisites, progression rules, applicable legal or regulatory body requirements, and programme flexibility.
- Programmes are fully designed before being offered to learners.

4.3.3 Robust arrangements for the quality assurance of learning resources, the learning environment and other learning resources. Depending on the blend of learning involved, there is a varying focus on the effectiveness and quality of the learning experience. For example, where appropriate, equal QA scrutiny is focussed on learner engagement with the learning resources and on their engagement with teaching staff. The nature of the learning materials and resources will also be different for online learners.

4.3.4 Processes that highlight the availability and timeliness of feedback to learners. In online modules this is likely to be achieved virtually, thus benchmarks and expectations will be different. In many remote contexts, learners will rely primarily on electronic learning resources.

4.3.5 Processes for learner records are sufficient and accurately maintained, and up-to-date learner records are available for monitoring progression and achievement. They will facilitate timely intervention for online learners who may be struggling. Where learning opportunities are flexible and allow learners to stop and start the programme, the student record arrangements are able to support the level and nature of flexibility permitted.

4.3.6 Privacy laws on data protection are appropriate for all aspects of online provision. Learner concerns about the confidentiality of learner records are respected. For example, protocols will be necessary to manage and archive formal or informal learning conversations between learners or between learners and teaching staff, as appropriate. Learners are made aware of the regulations:

- that will provide them with a unique learner identity to be used by the provider;
- that protect learners and indicate their own electronic trail or digital persona.

4.3.7 Staff induction processes for staff employed to support or assess learners are in place. Staff are appropriately inducted and trained for their role in online learning. There may be aspects of the assessment process that are distinctive (or at least more prominent than in a face-to-face context) for online learning. For example, it is commonplace in online learning for assessors to assess, grade or mark learner assessment:

- where assignments have been set by someone else
- submitted and returned electronically
- from learners they have only met face-to-face on a few occasions throughout the academic year

4.3.8 Moderation processes are in place to ensure consistency and share good practice where more than one tutor is employed to support or assess more than one group of learners. Documentation of best practice examples and exchange of information among all staff is important where there is a growing knowledge base, a growing availability of additional open access resources and constant demands to update ICT skills. Provider support through structured networking is in place to facilitate this.