

Independent Evaluation Report on an Application for Validation of a Microcredential Programme

# Provider details

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| **Provider name** | National College of Ireland (NCI) |
| **Date of report** | 4th May 2021 |

1. Overall recommendations

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| **Programme** | **Title** | Certificate in Digital Capabilities and the Learner Experience |
| **Award** | Special Purpose Award |
| **Credit** | 10 |
| **NFQ Level** | Level 7 |
| **Recommendation**  *Satisfactory OR Satisfactory subject to proposed conditions OR Not Satisfactory* | Satisfactory |

1. Expert Panel

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| **Name** | **Role** | **Affiliation** |
| Mr Ronnie Harrison | Chair | Head of Quality and Academic Affairs, Open Training College (OTC) |
| Dr Frances Boylan | Subject Matter Expert | Head of eLearning Support and Development, TU Dublin |
| Dr Gina Noonan | Subject Matter Expert | Head of Centre for Teaching and Learning, IT Carlow |

1. Programme Profile Information (as supplied by provider)

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| **Brief synopsis of the programme** |
| The learner will explore the dynamic relationship between technological innovation, education and technology-enhanced learning in an online, bite-sized manner. They will explore the policy context for the development of technology-enhanced learning in relevant Irish sectors, and the use of digital capability frameworks to inform and structure practice. Through engagement with the technologies that support blended delivery, practitioners will critically reflect on the learner experience and use these technologies to collaborate with other practitioners.  In this manner, the proposed programme will develop the practitioner’s understanding of the environment in which developing digital practices are embedded. Overall, the proposed programme aims to enhance the practitioner’s capability to extend professional practice goals through the use of digital technologies, and to develop strategies to facilitate learners’ digital capabilities. The programme will lead to a Special Purpose Award at Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications. It will consist of one module worth 10 ECTS (i.e., 250 hours of learner effort). |
| **Target learner groups** |
| The target group are learning professionals in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector or the wider sphere of adult and community education. The profile of prospective learners includes FET learning practitioners (approx. 72% of the workforce) and managers (approx. 14% of the workforce) working across diverse contexts. The learning practitioner group includes teachers, tutors, community educators, training instructors, and resource persons. The manager group includes ETB central management, programme coordinators, adult education officers, training services managers, and assistant managers, further education principals and deputies. |
| **Rationale for Programme** |
| This programme is foundational to a practitioners’ investigation of technologies and strategies for the enhancement of teaching/training, learning and assessment practice in their own contexts. In developing this module as a micro-credential, the aim is to provide practitioners with the opportunity to appraise the current digital capabilities of themselves, their organisation and their relevant learners. This proposed programme is of particular value for practitioners and managers who are considering reviewing or enhancing their individual and institution’s digital capabilities, whether that be through policy or practice.  Since 2018, learner demand for the existing principal programme, the Certificate in Technology-Enhanced Learning, has continued to grow at a steady rate, with a recruitment growth of 26% from 2018 to 2020. In terms of retention and completion, evidence also indicates that the existing Level 7 programme is performing well with an overall pass rate of 92% from 2018 to 2019. It is envisioned that graduates of this micro-credential can choose to continue with further micro-credential development, in line with their life-long learning goals and career plan.  Throughout 2020, student engagement on the principal programme has highlighted that a shift to fully online learning has increased flexibility for learning professionals, who have benefitted from no commute for live classes, access to recordings, ongoing asynchronous chats and flexible directed activities. Coupled with this approach, the assessment strategy is designed to facilitate a real-world, individualised inquiry of digital technologies, with learning attainments that are agile and immediately applicable in a variety of environments |
| **Evidence of learner demand** |
| The origin of the programme lies in its commission by SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority, as a priority action under the FET Professional Development Strategy 2017-2019 to increase the capacity of FET practitioners to use digital technology to enhance learning. As such, the programme is aimed at learning practitioners and managers throughout the FET sector, while the online delivery mode means there is greater accessibility and flexibility for learners such that the programme can be delivered throughout the country. |

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| **Duration and Enrolment** | | | | | |
|  | **First Intake Date** | **Duration (months)** | **Cohorts / Intakes per Annum** | **Enrolment i.e. learners per Intake** | |
| **Maximum** | **Minimum** | **Maximum** |
| **Part-Time** | 1st September 2021 | 12 Weeks | 3 | 7 | 30 |

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| **Panel Commentary on Section C: Programme Profile Information**  *This should set out the panel’s views on the adequacy of the case made by the provider for the approval of this programme as a viable, stand alone offering for the target learner group. The panel should take into account the proposed rationale, evidence of market demand, learner numbers, entry criteria, and marketing information. The information on objectives, MIPLO’s and marketing information, rationale, should also be checked.*  *The following Validation Criteria as they apply to this programme should be borne in mind, while also recognising that the programme of which this microcredential is a module, has already been deemed to have met these criteria.*  ***Criterion 3****.The programme concept, implementation strategy, and its interpretation of QQI awards standards are well informed and soundly based (considering social, cultural, educational, professional and employment objectives)*  ***Criterion 2:*** *The programme objectives and outcomes are clear and consistent with the QQI awards sought*  ***Criterion 11:*** *Learners enrolled on the programme are well informed, guided and cared for.*  ***Criterion 12****: The programme is well managed*  ***The headings below are indicative only and can be removed*** |
| **Rationale, Learner Demand, Viability:**  The rationale for the micro-credential programme has been clearly articulated in that it aims to support the continuing professional development of educators in the FET sector and wider arena of adult and community education. Having this as a standalone award will allow such professionals to adopt a more flexible approach to their own learning and development. This may also act as a motivating factor for learners in that they are being supported to continue their own personal and professional development at a pace that aligns with their own specific needs and contexts. In addition, the standalone nature of the programme clearly responds to a need for more flexible pathways for CPD.  There is a clear demand for the programme based on the numbers presented and the move to online provision is likely to increase learner numbers based on the flexibility of the programme and with the overall affordances of online learning. Additionally, the fact that the programme was originally commissioned by SOLAS suggests that there is continued support for the future of the programme.  **Proposed Award - consistency with NFQ:**  The proposed award is consistent with the level 7 standards of the NFQ and is clearly mapped against all of the relevant sub-strands.  **Learner Interests: - (Information, QA, Supports, Benefits / Skills accruing from programme):**  It is clear from the programme documentation that the learners will be fully informed on all aspects of the programme in advance and that college supports will be made available. It is great to see that the opening session focuses on a structured induction and introduces the learners to the programme, the attendant teaching, learning and assessment strategies and the supports.  **Recommendations:**   1. Ensure that all documentation and information relating to the microcredential specifies that it will be delivered in a ‘fully online’ mode, so that this is clear to the prospective student from the outset. Each of the module descriptors refer in week 1 to a guided introduction to the blended learning environment after which only online tools are referred to. The term Blended Learning Environment is reserved for when there is an element of physical f2f offered to the participants, however large or small that element is. In the case of these modules, they are completely online and are not blended in the traditional sense. It may just be a case that content was copied from the original blended learning module descriptors into these validation documents but some editing is required. 2. The programme team may wish in the opening session to explicitly include a section on Peer Support so as to establish a support network from the outset. This might be in the form of some group activity which also acts as an ice-breaker. In the move to online induction, this will be of more significance as learners won’t have the possibility to interact socially as they would have had with an on-campus induction session. 3. In terms of other learner supports, the programme team may wish to consider the development of guidance documentation for learners on the various assessment strategies, e.g. a reflective practice guidance document/resource to further support learners, e-assessment design and evaluation, learning journal design/ePortfolio (if intended to use). 4. Finally, in terms of learner support, the team may wish to embed the creation of an Academic Writing Group as part of the overall programme. This would be particularly relevant for those engaging on the programme who may not be familiar with what is expected of them in terms of writing at this level. This may be offered already under a different programme (or even the parent programme). |

1. Programme Content, Delivery and Assessment

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| **Summary of specifications for teaching staff** | | |
| **Role** | **Profile** | **WTE** |
| Lecturer | This role requires a person who is qualified to at least level 9 in an area related to Learning and Teaching, Technology Enhanced Learning or related field. They should have experience teaching in an online capacity using a variety of platforms and tools. | 2 (4 x 0.5) |
| Programme Director | This role requires a person who is qualified to at least level 9 in an area related to Learning and Teaching, Technology Enhanced Learning or related field. They should have experience teaching in an online capacity using a variety of platforms and tools. In addition, the person should have experience in managing a programme. | 1 |
| Programme Co-ordinator | This role requires a person who has experience in coordinating a course as well as has experience with facilitating collaboration between team members. | 1 |

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| **Mode(s) of Delivery** |
| The programme will be delivered through an online learning mode, comprising synchronous online (60%) and directed e-learning (40%) activities. This delivery mode allows for greater accessibility for prospective learners and greater flexibility for enrolled learners, while also mitigating future risks to classroom provision potentially arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. |

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| **Assessment Strategy** |
| The strategy, which remains unchanged from the originally validated module, envisages 100% continuous assessment with two staged assignments, underpinned by a practitioner inquiry cycle, that build towards an appraisal of digital capabilities, involving practitioner, learner and organisational competence, and the imagining of future scenarios for practice that facilitate these capabilities. This is authentic assessment that focuses on the practitioner’s context for practice.  The first assignment constitutes the first phase of the inquiry cycle. This involves investigating and understanding the digital capabilities and expectations of a group of FET learners and developing a set of profiles representative of their diversity as the basis for reasoned planning. The emphasis at this stage is on assessment for learning and the generation of feedforward advice that the practitioner can act on in the developing inquiry for stage 2 (summative) assessment.  The second assignment extends the inquiry to include a self-appraisal of digital capabilities, and an appraisal of organisational digital capabilities, including policies and infrastructure. The inquiry cycle is concluded with the imagining of future scenarios for the development of digital practice that integrates understanding of current digital capabilities at the three levels of appraisal. |

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| **Panel Commentary on Section D: Programme Content, Delivery and Assessment**  *This should set out the panel’s views on the programme content, mode(s) of delivery and assessment, human and ICT resources. If the parent programme is more than a year old, the currency of module content and supporting technology should be checked.*  *The following Validation Criteria as they apply to this programme should be borne in mind, while also recognising that the programme of which this microcredential is a module, has already been deemed to have met these criteria.*  *Criterion 5: The programme’s written curriculum is well structured and fit-for-purpose.*  *Criterion 6: There are sufficient qualified and capable programme staff available to implement the programme as planned*  *Criterion 7:* *There are sufficient physical resources to implement the programme as planned*  *Criterion 8: The learning environment is consistent with the needs of the programme’s learners*  *Criterion 10: There are sound assessment strategies*  *The headings below are indicative only and can be removed* |
| **Currency of content:**  The programme content seems very appropriately aligned to the learning outcomes, and offers both theoretical and practical dimensions.  **Recommendations:**   1. Whilst there is a lot of content around the digital learner and their capabilities and expectations, it would be very valuable on this programme to also include a section on the broader issue of learning and how this might translate to a digital context. There is a danger that we create an artificial binary between *the learner* and *the digital learner*, when arguably they may be one and the same. 2. Also, in a programme such as this, it would be important to consider the inclusion of themes such as ‘digital literacy, digital well-being and citizenship, learner-led instructional design’, in addition to broader instructional strategies and pedagogical approaches, such as a flipped classroom approach, asynchronous collaboration through discussion boards, and how all of this impact upon the learner experience, etc. Although there are mentions of some of these in the recommended resources, the programme team may wish to refer to this explicitly in the indicative content. 3. In terms of the Reading List, the team may wish to consider expanding the recommended reading or even identifying key chapters in the recommended texts. Given that the module is being delivered online, it would be important to offer the learners as much direction as possible for the self-study aspect and as such, identifying key chapters/sections to be read in advance of particular sessions would be beneficial. Also, in terms of offering different means of representation in terms of support resources, it might be an idea to add some indicative listening (e.g. podcasts) for inclusion. 4. Finally, for the online course suggestions, the team might wish to clarify what the learner is expected to do in relation to these - are they component parts of the self-directed study? The team may wish to consider designing an assessment piece around the completion of an online course and evaluate it from the lens of a learner. This would align very well with the programme aims.   **Delivery mode(s):**  The programme’s online approach is well considered given the nature of the learning outcomes and content of the programme and given the recent move to more online provision. Not only does it offer a flexible approach to CPD, but it allows learners on the programme to experience different technologies and practices which they may wish to replicate in their own classroom environments.  **Recommendations:**   1. There are some concerns about the schedule for week 1 and week 12 for each of the three modules. Two x full day f2f events topping and tailing each module was the model followed for the blended learning principal programme. However, that model cannot be translated directly over effectively when delivering fully online. The attention of participants will be lost if they must be online for 6+ hours in one day. Maintaining attention for that length of time is exhausting for both the participant and the presenters, and as the hours go by retention, engagement levels, and the amount of information that the participants are processing will drop significantly, as will the quality of the delivery itself potentially. The programme team would be encouraged to review the content being delivered on those days day and see what could be delivered equally well as exciting, directed, engaging, and maybe even gamified, interactive content that the participants bring themselves through in their own time before a specified due date on which there are shorter live sessions. In fact, these live sessions might even become 2 or more very targeted and engaging sessions delivered virtually over 2 or more days rather than all on the one day. 2. The programme team may wish to reconsider the inclusion of a group session mid-way through the programme, as a support session for learners. This session would provide learners the space to collaborate and learn from each other, and could be used as a learner feedback session in order to address any learning challenges experienced. This would be particularly significant in an online module in which learners may need some additional support. This could be facilitator-led and as the programme develops, graduates could be invited in to facilitate this session for future cohorts, thereby adding to the collaborative dimension of the programme whilst also supporting its viability.   **Assessment strategy:**  Whilst the assessment strategy is clearly laid out, there may be some additional aspects which the programme team might wish to consider.  **Recommendations:**   1. These would include the type of assessments involved, as currently it is not clear as to what form these are taking. Although, detail is given as to what will be investigated as part of the assessments, it may not be clear to the learner as to what is expected of them by way of written piece/recorded piece/word count/notional engagement hours/deliverables. Also, I would suggest that given that pieces like discussion boards form part of the teaching and learning strategy, the team may wish to reconsider the breakdown of the assessment and the inclusion of discussion board contributions for example. 2. In addition, it is not clear if these are both individual or group-based assessments. In addition, it might be an idea to make it more explicit as to how the assessments will be underpinned with literature and scholarship in the area of TEL. 3. Other forms of assessment that may be considered for inclusion are inter alia, poster creation, design and evaluation of a technologically-based teaching and learning intervention, contributions to a discussion board, creation of a video-based teaching resource, evaluation of existing TEL resource. All of these could also lead to the development of a collection of OERs which would be invaluable for future rollouts of the programme, and they could be used to further promote the programme and disseminate the knowledge acquired by learners throughout their participation. 4. As this is a level 7 award in which engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning should be very apparent, there is scope here, in the assessment strategy, for the inclusion of a piece (worth 20% for example) which focuses on engagement with literature in this area. This may take the form of a critical essay/a chapter or journal review/an abstract composition/an annotated bibliography/an evaluation of TEL resources, etc. or something which would clearly evidence engagement with SoTL. 5. Finally, in terms of the assessment strategy, consideration would need to be given to the feedback strategy so that the learners are aware as to how and when they will be issued feedback. This is particularly relevant given the importance of formative assessment. This is something that the team may wish to include as part of the group session that has already been suggested here.   **Human and ICT resources:**  The panel is satisfied from what has been presented in the documentation and from further clarification with NCI that sufficient resources are in place to deliver the programmes both concurrently and in sequence.   1. As these modules are 100% online there will be less of a demand on physical resources to implement the programme, so the satisfaction of this particular criterion is no longer as much of a concern. Rather, the programme team will need to ensure that all of the free or licensed, locally hosted or cloud-based platforms and/or apps, that they are using to engage their online students with the module content and assessments, and facilitate any synchronous or asynchronous collaborative activities, are fit-for-purpose and can handle an increase in user numbers. They also need to ensure that all essential readings for these online modules are available online and not only in book form in the NCI library.   In addition to this, the programme team will need to ensure that other supports are in place for their online students to make sure that they feel part of a community of learners. It is suggested that the team think about including e.g. communication statements in the online modules; discussion boards where students can get technical and module related support from their peers and staff; live office hours each week so students have a time where they know they can meet a lecturer face-to-face; and encourage the students to set up a social group among themselves, to name a few. Given that the team will have students taking all 3 modules while others are dipping in and out, it’ll be quite a different learning and teaching scenario than the team have faced before this on the principal programme where the cohort stayed together for the year, so more work will need to go into the support aspect to help the students gel as a group and feel less isolated. |

# Overall recommendation to QQI

## Programme:

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| **Select one** |  |
| √ | **Satisfactory** (meaning that it recommends that QQI can be satisfied in the context of unit 2.3) of Core policies and criteria for the validation by QQI of programmes of education and training; |
|  | **Satisfactory subject to proposed special conditions** (specified with timescale for compliance for each condition; these may include proposed pre-validation conditions i.e. proposed (**minor**) things to be done to a programme that almost fully meets the validation criteria before QQI makes a determination); |
|  | **Not satisfactory**. |

### Reasons for the overall recommendation

1. The panel is satisfied that given the validation of the overall programme and any adjustments presented that the programme is fit-for-purpose and meets the learning outcomes at the specified level.

### Any other observations:

1. The panel would like to thank the Programme Development Team for providing such a detailed panel member briefing pack and insightful self-evaluation reports. The preparation of such comprehensive documentation has made the validation process a pleasure to undertake.
2. Recommendations from the panel are listed in the relevant section of the report. The panel would appreciate a response to these recommendations before the final sign off on the recommendation for validation.

### Special Conditions of Validation (directive and with timescale for compliance)

1. There are no special conditions of validation.

## Declarations of Evaluators’ Interests

This report has been agreed by the evaluation panel and is signed on their behalf by the chairperson.

Panel chairperson: Ronnie Harrison Date: 04/05/2021

Signed: 

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