Reengagement Panel Report

Assessment of QA Procedures for Blended Learning

Part 1   Details of provider

1.1   Applicant Provider

Registered Business/Trading Name:	New Links Training Solutions
Address:	Unit 1, Boeing Avenue Airport Business Park Co. Waterford X91AK46
Date of Application:	25 March 2021
Date of resubmission of application:	18 April 2021
Date of evaluation:	
Date of site visit (if applicable):	02 July 2021
Date of recommendation to the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee:	09 September 2021

1.2   Profile of provider

New Links Training Solutions (NLTS) is an owner-managed training and personal development provider, operating from a base close to Waterford City and having strong links with local Irish and multinational employers, offering both QQI and bespoke, non-accredited classroom-based training courses.

NLTS has adopted an agile mindset since it started in 2009, creating a clear corporate personality, responding to changing market needs, and successfully adapting to the modern VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) operating environment. NLTS has also previously delivered Momentum major award programmes to support job-creation initiatives and worked with a major national charity to develop employees' retail and customer service skills. NLTS' current scope of QQI provision includes Special Purpose Level 6 Training Delivery & Evaluation ("Train the Trainer"), Level 6 Supervisory Management, and Level 6 Personal & Professional Development.

Having successfully completed reengagement with QQI in 2019, NLTS has worked on further enhancements to its QA systems. Online and blended provision formed part of NLTS' longer-term plans, but the impact of Covid-19 forced a rethink with a rapid pivot in its business model towards online training provision under QQI's current temporary exemption to operate outside of approved scope of provision in respect of blended learning for training providers.

During 2020/21, NLTS revisited its initial contingency plans to adapt to changing circumstances, developing solid online training competencies and resources. This has allowed NLTS to continue operating online (Zoom VLE, Moodle LMS, e-commerce website), together with engagement with its learners and sponsoring employers on this new delivery method and future blended learning (BL) planning. NLTS recognises that there are many moving parts within BL delivery, so it has enhanced its own QA and governance for an online context, adopted more flexible, team-based internal working methods, plus remodelled and improved its training materials (e.g., the creation of a "trainer's toolkit").

Part 2   Panel Membership

Name	Role of panel member	Organisation
Ronnie Harrison	Chair	Head of Quality & Academic Affairs, Open Training College
Michael Kelly	QA Expert/Secretary	Consultant, Wildgeese Training & Quality Solutions
Silvia Gallagher	Blended Learning QA Expert	Research Fellow, Department of Computer Science and Statistics, Trinity College

Part 3   Findings of the Panel

3.1   Summary Findings

The panel recommends approval of New Links Training Solutions' (NLTS') draft QA procedures for blended learning (BL). There are no Mandatory Changes and Specific Advice relates to enhancements to NLTS' current approach, all of which were embraced by the NLTS team with an open mindset and a clearly expressed commitment towards continuous improvement.

The panel also commends NLTS for the quality and clarity of its BL application and also the positive manner in which it engaged with the panel's requests for additional information and clarification. The panel recognises the open and constructive dialogue with the NLTS team during the virtual site visit and this helped to reinforce the sense of quality and striving for excellence which was apparent within the conduct of the visit, the BL application itself and supporting materials and resources reviewed by the panel.

Despite the exigencies of Covid-19 for a niche training provider, it was clear to the panel that NLTS management and the wider NLTS team have approached BL provision with a systematic, forward-thinking and creative mindset. The panel considers that this approach will stand NLTS in good stead in terms of its future BL course offerings. The challenges faced by NLTS during the initial migration to virtual learning via Zoom were honestly addressed, as was the approach to the new Moodle LMS where the interests and needs of learners were at the forefront of these developments. Therefore, the panel was confident that NLTS was in a good position to develop both its current virtual delivery and planned BL offerings within sound QA and pedagogical frameworks.

It was clear that NLTS had implemented creative and thoughtful solutions for its current delivery in the move online (e.g., use of gamification; a trainer toolkit; the recognition of how online access appealed to learners for whom English is a second language). The panel was also impressed with the example of how BL might be adopted in place of traditional classroom delivery to help meet the needs of learners and employers in the retail sector in a creative, refreshing and innovative manner.

The panel observed the significant efforts made by NLTS to plan for blended delivery, the investment in new technology and resources, the engagement and response of team members to the challenges of online delivery, plus the openness in seeking out best practice solutions and new ideas through the planned collaboration with Learnovate. In summary, the panel is pleased to recommend approval of NLTS' draft quality assurance procedures for BL and is confident that NLTS will engage with the items of Specific Advice set out in Part 5 of this report.

3.2 Recommendation of the panel to Programmes and Awards Executive Committee of QQI

	Tick <u>one</u> as appropriate
Approve <u>New Links Training Solutions</u> draft QA procedures for Blended Learning	X
Refuse approval of [the provider's – insert name] draft QA procedures for blended learning **pending mandatory changes** set out in Section 6.1 (If this recommendation is accepted by QQI, the provider may make a revised application within six months of the decision)	
Refuse to approve [the provider's – insert name] draft QA procedures for blended learning	

Part 4 Evaluation of draft QA Procedures for Blended Learning submitted by New Links Training Solutions

The following is the panel's findings following evaluation of <u>New Links Training Solutions</u> *quality assurance procedures for blended learning against QQI's Topic Specific QA Guidelines - Blended Learning.*

Panel Findings:

General Comments

The panel commends New Links Training Solutions (NLTS) for its overall engagement and significant body of work in pivoting away from its established classroom delivery model towards online virtual delivery during the Covid-19 related restrictions and its planning for future blended learning (BL). This has occurred within a very challenging training and economic environment in the context of the pandemic.

For the purposes of this review, the panel has been guided by QQI's Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes (2018). The panel has also considered NLTS' formal application (March 2021) and its detailed responses to requests for information (RFI), including NLTS' own gap analysis mapping exercise against the BL guidelines referred to above.

The review has assessed the effectiveness of NLTS' quality in terms of policies, procedures, operations and underpinning methodologies in the context of BL delivery. This report is organised in terms of: Organisational Context, Programme Context and Learner Context.

Organisational Context

Strategy & Training Infrastructure

NLTS outlined the context of the planned move to BL from the initial adoption of a VLE in response to Covid-19 contingency plans towards BL provision in future. The panel was provided with evidence of this strategic move in terms of programme modifications, resourcing (Zoom and Moodle platforms; adaptation of teaching materials and methods), IT supports and Disaster Recovery planning, upskilling of tutoring staff and new ways of working.

The planned scope of provision will be directed towards the current QQI Level 6 courses for the near future. NLTS also provided evidence that its future planning incorporated the creative use of BL techniques to enhance previous programme delivery and plan for new courses as NLTS progresses out of a Covid-19 training context.[1]

NLTS demonstrated an understanding of how it needed to build its BL expertise in line with learner and corporate client expectations so has used BL for non-accredited delivery to date. Although a VLE had been developed as a contingency plan and BL was the way ahead, it was noted that there might be possible confusion in terminology for both learners and tutors so this will need to be addressed moving forward. Training materials should also signpost delivery methods (VLE or BL).

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[1] Approval of a provider's QA procedures for blended learning is not retrospective; any changes to the mode of delivery of existing programmes (outside of Covid-19 related exemptions) still needs to be sought from, and separately approved by, QQI.

Overall, the panel commends NLTS for its strategy, planning and investment in infrastructure to deliver BL in future.

Staff Training & Development

New techniques had been explored to upskill staff for online delivery and enhance the learner experience (e.g., the Zoombies exercise and other gamification ideas). The benefits and challenges of virtual delivery had been given careful consideration in terms of learner profiles, where it was clear that online delivery suited certain types of learners, but others might require additional supports. The tutor and online development representatives interviewed by the panel displayed a positive commitment to the BL project and their own engagement and upskilling for BL delivery, providing sound examples of practical teaching and learning experiences to date.

Documentation

NLTS demonstrated a future focus in adapting the QA arrangements originally approved in 2019 for this new and emerging online context. It had built on its QQI reengagement experience and created clear, documented plans for the transition to BL. In addition, NLTS had responded positively with requests for further information, such as the Disaster Recovery plan. The panel was confident that the transition to BL was being properly documented and planned, and that the existing Quality Assurance Manual was being updated as matters progressed.

Programme Context

Programme Delivery

NLTS' main scope of provision has been Level 6 professional development courses. The transition to online teaching and learning was discussed in the context of the pandemic and it was clear that tuition methods and content were being developed to a high standard and that NLTS was open to further changes as their online experience grew.

Information provided to corporates, learners and other interested parties on the NLTS website has been updated to reflect changes in programme delivery. Online delivery options are clearly explained to help learners and their employers select the most suitable training delivery method.

Programme Materials Development & Approval

Pedagogical considerations for online delivery had been explored and documented to enable tutors and other staff to adapt existing materials, develop new content and learning artefacts, and revisit existing curriculum delivery methods. Quality considerations formed part of this move to online delivery and instructional design was informed by external academic oversight and input to these new online tools via the Quality Committee. The sample programme provided to the panel for review was influenced by best practice in BL techniques and this augurs well for the future.

NLTS has previously offered the full suite of course materials for classroom delivery and this has continued for online teaching (apart from self-assessment quizzes, which are released in sequence). Learners for whom English was a second language found this useful as they could read ahead and note queries in advance of tutor-led discussions. NLTS' learners are not homogeneous groups, ranging from executive to operative levels so the tutors/developers recognise that different learners require different levels of guidance. NLTS' corporate clients require high standards in training, working on a partnership basis to

deliver excellence. There was an interesting example of a corporate client in the food sector which was moving fully online in terms of its internal operations so NLTS' own plans were more closely aligned with customer/learner requirements than the provider might have anticipated during its initial BL planning.

Tutors are working closely with the course content coordinator to review and adapt programme materials for online delivery. This offered opportunities to apply new learning techniques, e.g., conversational intelligence, to enhance programme delivery. Evidence of pedagogical methods (e.g., Gagne's 9 events) and peer support were provided as tutors transitioned to online with the creation of a tutors' toolkit, plus the use of reflective practices, e.g., observation of live teaching with feedback to capture good practice in action. NLTS had also developed plans for tutor upskilling, such as participation in and sharing learning from online conferences to support BL developments, plus the Learnovate partnership to support BL expertise. Potential enhancements to Moodle could include listing course learning outcomes on the home page of the course plus tutor contact details/photos alongside the training materials. The W3C guidelines on online materials could also be used to ensure that visual information, text narratives, etc. were configured as additional supports for learners.

Assessment & Academic Integrity

Assessment for current courses is via written assignments. Based on a recommendation by the external adviser on the Quality Committee, the plan is to incorporate a plagiarism check tool within Moodle to assist learners and tutors.

Learner Context

The panel commends NLTS for its commitment to a positive learner experience and a continuous improvement approach in online delivery.

Information for learners

Learner groups are small (circa. 10 per group) and are supported through a learner journey set out in Moodle using friendly, standardised language. Learner induction-type materials had been provided to the panel for this review. It was considered that these could be standardised for future delivery.

Learner experience & support

Learning is designed to be a personalised experience and tutors can use online polls on Zoom to "take the pulse" of live sessions to monitor engagement and progress. Overall quality is monitored by NLTS staff during delivery via Zoom. The aim is one of psychological safety to support a safe learning environment and NLTS provided an example of an introverted learner who enjoyed the Zoom context more than a traditional classroom learning environment. A resource library is available in addition to course content. Simulations and games are used to foster a team learning environment and encourage creative thinking.

Part 5   Mandatory Changes to QA Procedures for Blended Learning and Specific Advice

5.1   Mandatory Changes

None.

5.2   Specific Advice

1.	The current VLE policy could be subsumed into the BL policy to create a single, standardised approach with appropriate changes to the related checklists.

1. The current VLE policy could be subsumed into the BL policy to create a single, standardised approach with appropriate changes to the related checklists.
2. Existing onboarding materials should be reviewed in order to specify and communicate a learner induction.
3. The provider should give consideration to implementing small design changes to the VLE, e.g., accessibility guidelines for learners per W3C international web guidance.
4. Continue existing work to integrate and document BL elements into the provider's overall QA manual.
5. Implement feedback and monitoring sessions, documented for future use, during the transition to BL.
6. Build on current staffing and infrastructure plans to map out the predicted BL future delivery potential.

Part 6   Approval by Chair of the Panel

This report of the panel is approved and submitted to QQI for its decision on the approval of the draft Quality Assurance Procedures or Blended Learning of New Links Training Solutions.

R. Harrison

Name: Ronnie Harrison

Date: 13-07-2021

Annexe 1: Documentation provided to the Panel in the course of the Evaluation

Document	Related to
Application to QQI - Blended Learning (Mar 2021)	All Sections
RFI response to panel BL queries (30 Jun 21)	All Sections
QA mapping – BL context (Jun 2021)	All Sections
Organisational Chart	QA responsibilities & workflows
QQI Reengagement Report (2 Sep 2019)	All Sections
Document Control Schedule (Policy - Sep 2020)	Organisation – Documentation.
Learner Handbook(2020-V1.3)	Learners – Information; Programmes – Delivery.
Using Gagne's 9 Events to Guide the Development of Blended Learning Training	Organisation – Strategy; Staff Training. Programmes – Development & Delivery. Learners – Experience & Support; Information.
Role Descriptors: BL Course Monitor, BL Tutor, System Administrator	Organisation – Strategy; Staff Training & Development; Documentation.
Sample Welcome Email & Learner Instructions (24 May 21)	Learners – Experience & Support.
Disaster Recovery Plan (Jun 2021)	Organisation – Strategy; Documentation.
Video: How to Use Moodle	Learners – Experience & Support.
Data Breach Management (Policy – Jun 21)	Organisation – Strategy; Documentation.
QA Manual (V2-May 2019)	All Sections.
Covid-19 Contingency Plan (initial plan March 2020; updated plan Sep-Dec 2020; Health & Safety Notice Jun 2020)	All Sections.

Annexe 2:   Provider staff met in the course of the Evaluation

Name	Role/Position
Janet Tumulty	Director of Training & QA
Jim Tumulty	Commercial Director
Martina Harte	Senior Trainer
Sheena Hutchison	Course/communications coordinator

Appendix: Provider response to the Blended Learning QA Approval Panel Report

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19th July 2021

Reference: Response to Blended Learning Panel Report

Dear Panel Members,

The management of New Links Training Solutions would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude for your professional oversights and advice during the assessment of our Blended Learning application for extension of provision of QA procedures to QQI.

We would also like to thank the QQI QA staff who were, and continue to be highly responsive at each stage of the process. Throughout this process we felt supported and were provided with all the information needed to successfully progress our application. In this process we were able to re-test our approved QA procedures which have been in place following our successful re-engagement with QQI in 2019. Although some enhancement was needed we found that the structures were there to move us forward in to a new and somewhat unfamiliar part of our QA journey with QQI. In addition we consulted with our experienced external Quality Committee who were able to advise and critique the application at the various stages of development.

On the day panel members were more than accommodating in the delivery of critical feedback and in sharing their professional insights which are much appreciated – we plan to further enhance our Blended Learning procedures using the panel specific advices to guide us.

Again many thanks to the panel and to the wider support network within QQI who provided the necessary resources and timely two-way communication throughout this process. We are very proud to be associated with such a respected organization and we look forward to maintaining ongoing professional relationships with you throughout the coming months and years.

Kind Regards

Janet Tumulty
Director of Training and Quality Assurance

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