



Reengagement Panel Report

Assessment of QA Procedures for Blended Learning

Part 1 Details of provider

1.1 Applicant Provider

Registered Business/Trading Name:	DCM Learning
Address:	Level 3 Upper Mell, Drogheda, Co. Louth, A92 FK2A
Date of Application:	20 May 2021
Date of resubmission of application:	
Date of evaluation:	
Date of virtual site visit:	30 September 2021
Date of panel reconvene meeting (if applicable)	
Date of recommendation to the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee:	19 October 2021

1.2 Profile of provider

DCM Learning (DCM) is a Private/Independent Provider which has grown rapidly since its Quality Assurance (QA) arrangements were approved in 2016, with 1,600 certifications for QQI learners during 2020. The provider's vision is to revisit traditional learning models by bringing high quality learning to people rather than the traditional model of bringing people to learning. With this aim in mind, DCM offers free, non-accredited training tied to a membership concept as a means of engaging with and developing people's interest in its range of accredited programmes. DCM has an established training footprint with large multinational and major Irish employers, including business, health, higher education and local authority bodies.

The provider's current scope of provision covers minor awards at Levels 5/6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), mainly in the business and management areas. DCM plans to achieve validation of further QQI programmes, subject to progress with its Blended Learning (BL) initiative.



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, DCM pivoted towards online delivery as a contingency solution. The provider now seeks to extend its scope in line with QQI's *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes (2018)*. To this end DCM has developed a Blended Learning Strategy document designed to transform its training offerings through digital technology whilst providing an inclusive and accessible learning experience by positioning itself as an innovative training provider.

As part of this strategy, DCM has developed a clear set of guiding principles which places the learner at the centre of the BL strategy, focussed on active learning through user-friendly communication and learner involvement. This approach involves DCM's engagement with its learner community, employers and other interested parties to implement BL using appropriate technology, content authoring tools, upskilling its trainers and support staff, with these activities being directed by a clear management vision, effective project management and a continuous improvement mindset.



Part 2 Panel Membership

Name	Role of panel member	Organisation
David Denieffe	Chair	Institute of Technology Carlow
Naomi Pasley	Blended Learning QA Expert Panel Member	Hibernia College
Michael Kelly	QA Expert Panel Member/Report Writer	Wildgeese Training & Quality Solutions

Part 3 Findings of the Panel

3.1 Summary Findings

The panel recommends approval of DCM Learning's (DCM's) draft quality assurance (QA) procedures for Blended Learning (BL). There are no Mandatory Changes and Specific Advice relates to three areas where DCM Learning should seek to enhance its current approach to BL, all of which were taken on board by the provider's management during discussions at the panel's virtual site visit.

The panel was impressed by the quality of materials submitted for evaluation and these highlighted the provider's evident commitment to QA and continuous improvement across all its activities. As a commercially based provider, DCM management demonstrated to the panel clear evidence of sound business planning, risk and opportunity management, together with strategic focus in its online journey towards high-quality BL training. Against the challenging background of the pandemic, DCM has successfully pivoted its business model and engaged its people in moving online with the goal of full BL delivery alongside its established face-to-face training.

From discussion with the tutor representative, it was apparent that a professional training culture is embedded within DCM, with trainers engaged in reflective practices to improve learner experiences and helping to redesign training materials to a high standard, using design thinking and user-friendly approaches. DCM also demonstrated an investment in technology and people resources to provide a high quality training experience for its learners so that the provider is in a good position to further develop its QQI programme offerings in future.

In recommending approval of DCM's draft QA procedures for BL, the panel is confident that DCM will further develop its pedagogical frameworks in support of its teaching and learning activities, based on the previous training experiences discussed with the panel during the virtual site visit. Management recognises the value of a learner-centred strategy and how high quality will drive a sustainable future for the provider. The planned appointment of a non-executive director with eLearning and associated pedagogical skills will help to support the DCM team in this endeavour.



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

	Tick <u>one</u> as appropriate
Approve DCM Learning’s draft QA procedures for Blended Learning	X
Refuse approval of DCM Learning’s 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 DCM Learning’s draft QA procedures for blended learning	



Part 4 Evaluation of draft QA Procedures for Blended Learning submitted by DCM Learning

The following is the panel's findings following evaluation of DCM Learning's quality assurance procedures for blended learning against QQI's Topic Specific QA Guidelines - Blended Learning.

Panel Findings:

General Comments

The panel commends DCM Learning (DCM) for its professional approach and level of engagement with its Blended Learning (BL) strategy and execution to date. It was evident that the provider had referenced QQI's *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes (2018)* whilst drawing on its own organisational knowledge and shared experiences, using these tools in helping to frame its approach to BL.

DCM had included a BL strategy within its 2019-2022 corporate goals but circumstances had intervened to push this forward within a challenging training environment arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated social and economic fallout. However, the panel was impressed with the manner in which DCM had successfully balanced both its commercial and quality goals during this transition phase, carrying its team forward as a group and making a significant investment in new technology.

The panel's review has assessed the effectiveness of DCM's Quality Assurance (QA) procedures, supporting policies and operational methods for BL delivery against the 2018 guidelines and emerging best practice in BL delivery. This report is organised in terms of: Organisational Context, Programme Context, and Learner Context.

Organisational Context

The panel commends DCM for its clear strategic vision, sense of purpose and unity of approach which became clear from discussions with management and the tutor representative.

Strategy & Training Infrastructure

The challenges of pivoting the business from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic whilst maintaining the forward momentum of development and growth were vividly illustrated by the management team. It was evident that DCM's face-to-face programme delivery engaged with learners in a creative manner and the provider was extending this approach to its online delivery. In terms of BL provision, the provider had identified three levels through which the organisation could progress in using technology to enhance the learning experience as part of a BL journey for the provider and its stakeholders.

The provider's goal is to achieve a consistent and high-quality training experience by taking the learning experience to a new level. Positive feedback from both corporate clients and



learners had confirmed that DCM was on the right track so continued commercial success ensured future sustainability for the provider and would help support investment in new products, digital resources and training techniques. BL strategy and technology requirements were clearly documented and it was apparent to the panel that IT resources including fit-for-purpose software and hardware platforms, backup contingency plans and data management had all been evaluated as part of this new direction.

DCM management outlined the organisation's QA experience and its corporate learning to date, together with its plans to enhance DCM's organisational capacity through the search for and appointment of a non-executive director with suitable eLearning expertise and academic credentials. This would assist in developing a deeper understanding of learning models and pedagogy, creating a theoretical framework based on DCM's prior experiences with constructivist learning (e.g. as experienced through previous Agile and Lean training delivery), where practical team-based learning events had provided a foundation for adult learning and teaching within the provider.

Staff Training & Development

It was apparent to the panel that creative thinking and an openness to new ways of doing things permeated the organisation. Whilst management described plans to make BL a reality in the provider's training delivery it was noted from discussions with the trainer representative that recent organisational learning would also be applied in a planned return to classroom settings in future, thereby enhancing traditional teaching sessions.

Documentation

The QA arrangements approved in 2016 had been augmented to support BL delivery, with a clearly documented strategy addressing the provider's guiding principles in relation to the key deliverables for BL implementation, together with people and technology resourcing, risk/opportunity management, KPIs and continuous improvement.

The panel noted that the provider's BL application was fully documented and that there were no requirements for further information at the desktop review stage of the panel's work. This comprehensive response by the provider contributed to a strong interactive discussion of BL strategies and teaching methods during the virtual site visit.

Programme Context

The panel commends DCM for its comprehensive and thoughtful approach to programme delivery and development. It is apparent that best practice methods of Teaching and Learning are captured and shared across the training, SME and product development teams within the provider.



Programme Delivery

The provider's current scope of provision covers minor awards at NFQ Levels 5/6, primarily in business and management skills, with plans for validation of further QQI programmes, subject to progress with the BL strategy.

Programme Materials Development & Approval

The panel was impressed with DCM's project-based approach to programme improvement and BL implementation, with a dedicated eLearning manager in place to ensure that management's vision and new training content are delivered to a high standard. Work to date has focused on learner content (course content, assessment materials, learner handbooks, etc.) having the appropriate "look and feel" for online learners, the use of eLearning authoring tools, a new Learning Management System (Talent LMS), plus supervising the creation of learning materials by the tuition team.

Despite the exigencies of the pandemic, it was apparent that the transition to online had taken place in a planned manner. The existing pool of trainers were familiarised with the creative use of video, sound and design techniques and resources plus new teaching platforms (GoToTraining, Zoom) in order to support online delivery. Trainers work in a collegiate manner and the trainer representative outlined how the provider's main office includes a staging area where trainers are enabled to work collaboratively to ensure consistent presentation (introductions, dress code, delivery and conduct of training sessions). This ensures that a coherent, high quality training product is created. DCM trainers were already familiar with the use of experiential games and scenario planning in teaching, having applied these in previous classroom settings, so are now adapting these for use in online delivery.

Programme development has been formalised, largely following the ADDIE model as a five-step process overseen by the eLearning manager and supported by SMEs, experienced trainers and peer review. There is a detailed Programme Development Handbook which maps out the process with clear project tasks, milestones and authorities, together with guidance on content creation and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) guidelines. It was apparent that the handbook reflects trainers' real-life experiences in content development and delivery so the panel was confident that any new or revised programmes would be developed to high standards.

It was evident that lessons had been learned from the adaptation of face-to-face content for online delivery in 2020/21 and these experiences are being applied within new course development projects. It was apparent to the panel that real-life experiences and emerging requirements are being applied to the current training context so that, for example, Training Delivery & Evaluation learners will now acquire online training skillsets alongside the learning outcomes required within the programme as originally designed and validated.



New trainers work closely with a current trainer to gain hands-on experience of training session planning, content creation and assessment, with live monitoring during the initial phase. A trainer handbook documents the required standards and it was apparent that there is a culture of open two-way feedback within DCM so that new trainers can achieve the required standards rapidly. In addition, tutors engage in reflective practice, for example, in the transition from face-to-face classroom to online delivery, new insights emerged where the idea of “being present when adding value” was developed. Here the focus was on the trainer’s involvement at a value-added level was now being used whilst different approaches (video, set readings) could be used to address other areas of the teaching experience. In addition to groupwork in collaborative sessions, tutors share best practice techniques through both formal and informal sessions. GoToTraining has been used for online delivery over the past 18 months and it is planned to adopt Zoom Education in future.

Management demonstrated an understanding that quality in programme delivery would drive commercial success and outlined current plans to increase the DCM team capacity with the hire of a graphic designer plus sales and support staff to support planned growth.

Assessment & Academic Integrity

There are high-quality guides in use for all programmes which clearly outline assessment criteria, planning and presentation requirements, together with an explanation of academic integrity. Grammarly Professional is used by assessors to verify potential plagiarism and further guidance is provided by a short video. Although many learners have higher education qualifications and are familiar with Harvard referencing conventions, it is planned to use additional video content to enhance referencing skills across the wider learner cohort.

Learner Context

The panel commends DCM for its focus on creating a positive learner experience through all levels of interaction with the provider and a continuous improvement approach in its online developments.

Information for learners

The provider’s website, LMS and wider digital environment provides learners and other interested parties with clear information on the DCM learning experience.

Learners receive clear guidance within the LMS on how to approach their course, where to find resources and how to access a range of supports. Sample feedback provided to the panel referred to the quality of the training experience and the high levels of support and engagement.

Learner experience & support

Learners receive a user-friendly learner handbook with a clear code of conduct, an explanation of mutual expectations within the learning process, plus assessment and grading guidance.



Tutors take a creative approach to training sessions, using the opportunity to ground formal teaching within real-world workplace challenges. Where possible this is achieved through close liaison with learners and sponsoring employers prior to the training event, so that training activities are aligned with relevant workplace issues.

It was evident that presentation content was of a high standard with the tutor speaking to camera within each slide, thereby fostering learner engagement with the material and personalising the learning experience. The provider should build on this professional foundation and further develop its content, to incorporate additional interactive elements, in line with BL methodologies as it acquires more eLearning resources and develops its organisational knowledge and skills in this area.



Part 5 Conditions of QA Approval

5.1 Mandatory Changes

Nil

Part 6 Mandatory Changes to QA Procedures for Blended Learning and Specific Advice

6.1 Mandatory Changes

Nil

6.2 Specific Advice

The panel commends DCM Learning's approach to developing its Blended Learning capabilities and would further encourage the provider in this area by offering the following Specific Advice:

1. Articulate and develop its guiding educational principles and pedagogical frameworks, communicating these within its QA and supporting documentation as part of its future plans;
2. Enhance its online and blended learning competencies through the plan to appoint a suitably qualified non-executive director to support its future strategic direction; and
3. Encourage the further development of its planned blended learning strategy in order to enhance the learning experience.

Part 7 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 <Provider Name>.

Name:

DAVID DENIEFFE

Date:

5 October 2021



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

Document	Related to
Application to QQI Blended Learning – 20 May 2021	All sections
Quality Assurance Manual (QAM) - Revision 8 - February 2021	All sections
Blended Learning Strategy (Appx 1 of QAM above)	All sections
Mapping BL QA Guidelines to DCM QAS	All sections
Organisational Chart	Organisation - Strategy & training infrastructure: management, support functions & trainers/SMEs
Introduction to DCM Learning (presentation)	All sections
Sample Programme Materials and Resources (web link to LMS)	Learner experience & support
Programme Development Handbook	Programme - Programme materials development & approval
Academic Integrity & Plagiarism Policy & Procedures	Programme - Assessment & academic integrity
Learner Handbook	Learner – Information for learners
Trainer Handbook	Programme – Programme delivery
QAM: Reasonable Accommodation Procedure	Learner – Information for learners
Data Protection Policies & Procedures	Organisation – Strategy & training infrastructure
Academic Governance (Terms of Reference)	Organisation – Strategy & training infrastructure
QAM: Appeals Procedure	Learner – Information for learners
QAM: Complaints Procedure	Learner – Information for learners
QAM: Equality & Diversity Policy	Organisation - Documentation
QAM: Extension Request Procedure	Learner – Information for learners
QAM: External Examiner Code of Practice	Programme – Programme delivery
External Authentication Report (template)	Programme – Programme delivery



QAM: Health and Safety Policy	Organisation - Documentation
QAM: Internal Verification Procedure	Programme – Programme delivery
Memorandum of Understanding (Second Provider) – specimen copy	Organisation - Documentation
Programme Improvement Plan (template)	Programme – Programme delivery

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

Name	Role/Position
Denise Howard	Managing Director
Patrick Byrne	Operations Director
Padraig McCabe	Trainer

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



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Michelle Gallagher
Quality and Qualifications Ireland
26-27 Denzille Lane
Dublin 2

7 October 2021

RE: DCM Learning Blended Learning QA Procedures

Dear Michelle,

This letter is DCM Learning's formal response to the *Reengagement Panel Report - Assessment of QA Procedures for Blended Learning*. The report is factually accurate and we have enclosed our official responses to the Specific Advice given in the report.

We would like to take the opportunity to thank the panel again, we are very grateful for their professional insights and advice. Their attention to detail, commentary and engagement during our virtual site visit and the follow up report is to be commended.

We would also like to thank QQI for their support throughout the process and for giving us the opportunity to pursue our application virtually.

We are delighted with the Panels decision and we are looking forward to our application and the panel's report being submitted to the upcoming QQI PAEC.

If you need any further information or clarification on anything please let me know.

Kind Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Denise Howard". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Denise Howard
Managing Director

Directors
Denise Howard BSC
Patrick Byrne BBS ACA