

Feedback from HECA to QQI on the revised Blended Learning Guidelines

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<i>SUBMISSION FROM HECA ON QQI WHITE PAPER ON BLENDED LEARNING</i>	1

Summary Comments

As an initial comment, we would like to welcome the development of revised guidelines on the use of Blended Learning which builds on the initial White Paper on Flexible and Distributed Learning by QQI. Following on our feedback on the initial paper, we want to thank QQI for the work on the revision. While we see the paradigm shift relating to the greater use of technologically enabled learning as an important shift for Higher Education, we concur with the sentiments set out in the White Paper that embracing the opportunities afforded by technological advancements as fundamental to future developments in education and as opportunities to both enhance the teaching and learning environment and the capacity to ensure the quality of higher education as well as expand participation and opportunities for access. We would also like to express our gratitude to QQI for affording HECA an opportunity to contribute in a structured way to these revised guidelines.

HECA Colleges, collectively have extensive experience of using technology to support both learning and teaching (along with the majority of NUIs, IOTs and other HEA institutions nationally) who have been delivering level 7, 8 and 9 programmes using technologically enabled approaches for a decade), as well as the QA processes supporting education within the higher education sector. Therefore, the member Colleges have particular interest in ensuring that the Draft Guidelines further support the existing blended and on-line educational delivery, practice and innovation, which can be appropriately quality assured. In terms of the approach to the feedback, there are some general comments provided initially followed by some specific comments, which are intended to strengthen future Guidelines. The following provides a summary of the key points in this submission.

1. HECA broadly welcomes the intent of this White Paper to ensure that all elements of Programme Delivery within the HE Sector are appropriately Quality Assured,
2. HECA believes that the approach taken in this White Paper, while welcome is overly reductionist in ethos and effect. HECA would argue that all forms of Technologically Enabled/Supported education should be addressed more holistically within QA frameworks.

3. We believe that the definition Garrison and Kanuka (2004)¹ is somewhat restrictive and the implications from its use need more careful consideration in terms of inhibiting innovation. We suggest that the overall thrust of the policy and processes need to be more enabling and facilitative in order to allow for the rapidly changing technological advancements.
4. HECA is concerned that there is a somewhat artificial division between fully 'on line' and Blended Learning approaches.
5. HECA is unclear and somewhat confused in relation to the Guidance on students who are resident outside Ireland and would welcome discussion with QQI in relation to this aspect of the Guidelines.
6. A significant concern among HECA member College in relation to the White Paper relates to the issue of the focus it has on instructional modalities rather than the ethos of programme delivery. The emphasis on Virtual Learning Environments needs re-consideration in our view. The distinction between media (in this case technological media and on-line mainly) being used as a repository or carrier of content rather than as a component of active teaching and learning needs greater consideration in our view.
7. We argue that conceptualising Blended Learning as a discreet 'delivery mode' with a focus on activities or location etc., is a limiting and limited conceptualisation. While we accept that it is necessary to try to understand the 'elements' that typically describe or contribute to Blended Learning, we would strongly contend that it needs to be seen as part of an educative experience and that this is a much more useful way of understanding Blended Learning - understanding it within the context of the overall educative experience continuum referred to by Dewey, 1938²).
8. Finally, we might suggest that this document might be better titled as a White Paper on Technologically Supported or Enabled Education as a more inclusive and embracing term and one which does greater justice to the work of those who developed and refined the document on FDL and now this refined version. We appreciate how difficult it is to develop such papers and indeed to comment on them

¹ Garrison, D.R. & Kanuka, H. (2004). *Blended Learning: Uncovering Its Transformative Potential in Higher Education. Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95-105, p. 96.

² Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience & education*. New York, NY: Kappa Delta Pi.

in an informed way and we sincerely hope that this submission supports the excellent work that has been undertaken thus far.

Introduction & General Comments

In earlier feedback to the initial draft on FDL, HECA highlighted some key discrepancies we saw in terms of definition, coherence and consistency within the document, which we discussed at the meeting with QQI on February 1st, 2016. In that feedback, HECA noted the definition of FDL corresponded closely to the common understanding of Blended Learning and while we welcome the change of terminology to Blended Learning, there remains a lack of clarity and arguably some inherent problems with the definition of Blended Learning in the current White Paper.

In the previous submission to the first version of these Guidelines, HECA noted that

“virtually all higher (and presumably further) education programmes would be required to be considered FDL programmes. In contemporary higher and presumably further education contexts, it is difficult to conceive of standard programmes (ones described as classroom based); or ones with work-based learning elements as well as classroom instruction would not fit within the description as outlined”.

This continues to be that case and while we welcome the enhancement of the First Draft, we are still concerned at the lack of clarity or distinction as referred to earlier. We note in particular the support for both innovation in pedagogy as well as the potential contribution of technology as an enabling factor in education expressed cogently by the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education (2014³). We particularly welcomed their commitment to appropriate Quality Assurance approaches being applied but equally their cautionary note regarding a nearly embedded traditionalism and conservatism in Higher Educational Institutions in Europe. They refer to the fact that “In particular, requirements for individual programme accreditation sometimes create rigidities that do not encourage the timely adaptation of courses, including the introduction of novel approaches and pedagogies” and caution against such constraints in innovation, saying very clearly that it is “..... equally important that quality assurance procedures do not act as a barrier to the emergence of creative and innovative pedagogical developments and course design” and that ‘ these should become fully integrated in normal quality assurance and accreditation

³ High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education (2014) *Report to the European Commission on New Modes of learning and teaching in higher education*. Luxembourg: European Commission. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/reports/modernisation-universities_en.pdf (Accessed: 19 October 2017).

procedures, taking due account of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance” (p.39). We support this position and equally note that there is no direct reference to this important work in the White Paper or indeed to other national or international work undertaken in this area of pedagogical practice, e.g. the work of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL) in their report titled *A Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015 – 2017*(NF, 2015a⁴) and NFETL’s funded project on digital skills development: *All Aboard* (NFETL, 2015b⁵).

We re-iterate the key point that innovation in education, acceptance and expectation of technology and the ‘virtual world’ cannot and should not be ignored, but rather it needs to be welcomed, supported and embraced by all educational bodies, while subject to being managed prudently, proactively and cautiously without simultaneously stifling innovation in education. A number of authors including Salmon (2002⁶) report on the value of students being able to operate within a virtual learning community, or indeed take advantage of technology to enhance learning. A series of authors acknowledge that virtual learning communities help to motivate students, and they also provide flexible access and encourage socialization. Likewise, Lowry and Johnson (1999) also reported that the use of technology enabled flexible access to materials and enabled learners to work through course content at their own pace.

The design of and approaches to delivery of Blended Learning also differs in the literature, so we understand that it may be difficult to capture the complexity of evolving technologies in one set of Draft Guidelines and HECA commends the development group for their efforts in attempting this very challenging task. However, within that context, there is certainly a sense that it may be either wiser to develop and utilize a more inclusive set of guidelines which would view any form of online learning within a continuum (for reasons alluded to in this submission) or follow up these guidelines on Blended Learning with similar guidelines on the design and delivery of programmes entirely taken through on-line learning modes as a discreet form of learning.

⁴ NFETL (2015a) *Teaching and Learning in Irish Higher Education: A Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015-2017*. Dublin: NFTL. Available at: <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/priority-themes/benchmarking-digital-platform/> (Accessed: 19 Oct 2017).

⁵ NFETL (2015b) ‘All Aboard Digital Skills Framework for Irish Higher Education’. Available at: <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/DigitalSkillsFrameworkHE.pdf> (Accessed: 19 Oct 2017).

⁶ Salmon, G. (2002). *E-tivities: The key to active online learning*. London: Kogan Page.

From what we can see, and based on the experience within Member Colleges (and indeed from many NUI, IOT and HEA institutions nationally), three key distinctive typologies of delivery as presented in the literature are in use, with somewhat different levels of reliance or use of the online and face to face (classroom based) components of programmes. In the first typology (Type 1), programmes use the face-to- face time for traditional lectures (Keller, Hassell, Webber, & Johnson, 2009⁷). Francescucci & Foster (2013⁸) reported that no significant differences in student outcomes emerged between this type of approach when compared with the traditional teaching models. The second typology (Type 2) of blended programme are ones which use the on-line facilities for the delivery of lectures and the face-to-face time is used for interactive discussion (Dowling, Godfrey, & Giles, 2003). In this typology, significantly positive outcomes in student achievement emerged (Francescucci & Foster, 2013). The third type of Blended Programme (Type 3) use the face-to-face time for a combination of lecture and discussion (Du, 2011) with reports of significant performance improvement, but only as a result of the in-class in-depth activities (Francescucci & Foster, 2013).

Based on that evidence, while we welcome the Guidance and the refinement in this version of the Guidelines, we are somewhat concerned at the exclusion of entirely/fully online programme provision, largely because of the failure in the White Paper to clearly define or provide guidance on what does; or does not constitute 'blended learning'. It is unclear, when guidance is provided for online elements of programme provision why exclusively online programme provision is excluded.

⁷ Keller, J. H., Hassell, J. M., Webber, S. A., & Johnson, J. N. (2009). A comparison of academic performance in traditional and hybrid sections of introductory managerial accounting. *Journal of Accounting Education*, 27(3), 147–154.

⁸ Francescucci, A., & Foster, M. (2013). The VIRI (virtual, interactive, real-time, instructor-led) classroom: The impact of blended synchronous online courses on student performance, engagement, and satisfaction. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 43(3), 78.

Definitional Clarity and Implications

We note with particular interest that QQI have relied on a single definition of Blended Learning which refers to it as involving “the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” as defined by Garrison and Kanuka (2004)⁹.

We believe that this definition is somewhat restrictive and would draw attention to some other more recent definitions and conceptualisations of Blended Learning which may strengthen the intent of the White Paper and be more inclusive. We are somewhat concerned that the approach seems somewhat instrumental, focusing on the quality assurance of the methods of teaching or the resources that support teaching and therefore addresses unnecessarily narrow issues. We appreciate that the Guidelines are additional to those set out in the Core Validation Criteria and Guidelines but question whether or not these could be incorporated into the Core Guidelines.

We do so within the context of some more recent definitions of Blended Learning. If one, for example, takes the work of Driscoll and Carliner (2005¹⁰), which identified four typologies of pedagogy which could be seen as ‘blended learning’, namely; (1) a mix of web-based technologies; (2) a mix of various pedagogical approaches (e.g., constructivism, behaviorism, cognitivism); (3) a combination of any form of instructional technology with face-to-face instructor-led conditions; or (4) a combination of instructional technology with actual job tasks to form an effective mix of learning and working, there may be wider considerations that should be taken into account in the White Paper. This particular conceptualization of Blended Learning, is more recent than the widely used definition of Garrison and Kanuka (2004) but it also recognizes the dynamic and evolving definitional context for the concept. It effectively describes the ‘ethos’ of teaching and learning as much as the methodologies of instruction, but all typologies include reference to ‘mixed methods’.

⁹ Garrison, D.R. & Kanuka, H. (2004). *Blended Learning: Uncovering Its Transformative Potential in Higher Education*. *Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95-105, p. 96.

¹⁰ Driscoll, M. and Carliner, S., (2005) *Advanced Web-Based Training Strategies. Blended Learning as a Curriculum Design Strategy*. ASTD Press, New York.

Around the same time, Graham (2005¹¹) defined Blended Learning as a form of teaching that involved “the combination of instruction from two historically separate models of teaching and learning: traditional face-to-face learning systems and distributed learning systems” (p. 5). In this context, ‘distributed’ learning systems seemed to emphasise the use of computer-based technologies outside of scheduled class time. More recently, Bernard et al (2014¹²) also noted that blended learning involves a combination of face to face learning involving Classroom Instruction as well as learning outside class, but interestingly suggested that learning outside of the classroom should not exceed more than 50% of the course time. Both of these definitions suggest that contact time through ‘class contact’ is an important feature of learning and teaching. They resonate with the sentiments expressed by Osguthorpe and Graham (2003¹³) who also noted that blended learning involves “combining face-to-face with distance delivery systems... but its more than showing a page from a website on the classroom screen... those who use blended learning environments are trying to maximise the benefits of both face-to-face and online methods”.

More recently still, Sharma (2010¹⁴) cites the work of Oliver and Trigwell (2005:17¹⁵) which outlines three typologies of Blended Learning which also extends the scope of the concept. These are as follows;

‘The integrated combination of traditional learning with web based on-line approaches’ where ‘The delivery of the online part of the course is usually through learning technologies, typically involving a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) such as ‘Blackboard’ or ‘Moodle’ and comprising the use of synchronous and asynchronous electronic tools, such as, respectively, ‘chat’ and ‘bulletin boards’ (ibid:17).

Oliver and Trigwell (2005:17¹⁶) also provide an alternative perspective which suggests that Blended Learning also encompasses

¹¹ Graham, C. R. (2005). In C. J. Bonk & C. R. Graham (Eds.), *The handbook of blended learning*. Global perspectives, local designs (pp. 3–21). San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer Publishing.

¹² Bernard, R. M., Borokhovski, E., Schmid, R. F. Tamim, R. M., & Abrami, P. C. (2014) “A meta-analysis of blended learning and technology use in higher education: From the general to the applied” *Journal of Computing in Higher Education* 26(1), 87–122.

¹³ Osguthorpe, R. T., & Graham, C. R. (2003). “Blended learning systems: Definitions and Directions” *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 4(3), 227–234.

¹⁴ Sharma, Pete. (2010). Blended Learning. *ELT Journal*, 64(4), 456-458.

¹⁵ Oliver, M & Trigwell. K. ‘Can “Blended Learning” be redeemed?, *E-learning*, 2005, vol. 2/1 (pg. 17-26)

¹⁶ Oliver, M & Trigwell. K. ‘Can “Blended Learning” be redeemed?, *E-learning*, 2005, vol. 2/1 (pg. 17-26)

‘The combination of media and tools employed in an e-learning environment’, which ‘could describe a purely distance learning course, where no face-to-face lessons occur. Communication between the learner and e-tutor may take place through any number of technologies, such as email and internet telephone’(ibid:17). And a third option as follows ‘The combination of a number of pedagogic approaches, irrespective of the learning technology used’ (ibid.: 17). A course that combines ‘transmission’ and ‘constructivist’ approaches would fit into this category, such as one involving elements of a present-practice-produce methodology as well as task-based learning (cited in Sharma (2010:456).

Technological advancements in recent decades are continually emerging and have undoubtedly challenged both traditional teaching and pedagogical approaches and the understanding of teaching and learning. We agree that increasing levels of ‘online’ components of education courses are possible, feasible and mean that they provide greater opportunities, especially for non-traditional students including those wishing to progress themselves in life-long learning to be able to access higher (and further) education. It is also true that more recent advances in synchronous communication means that it is also possible to facilitate greater ‘real-time’ engagement with teachers thus allowing the experience of face-to-face classroom interaction in real time as well as asynchronously. Therefore, the conceptualization of somewhat artificial distinctions between ‘face – to face’ and online learning seems to be both limiting and fails to adequately take account of emerging technologies which allow virtual real time engagement. This approach may limit future development of innovative programmes and is one of the reasons we suggest a more inclusive and less restrictive approach.

Within the context of these somewhat more inclusive definitions, HECA believes that it would be helpful to consider online elements of programmes within a continuum and while we are pleased to see that QQI clearly recommends that these Guidelines are supplementary to the Core Validation Guidelines (2016).

Specific Points of Note

Definitional Issues

While we note the intent of the White Paper and are supportive of it, we are concerned that the definition used does not provide an indication or guidance on what QQI means by Blended Learning and therefore any validation or programmatic review panel may have varied interpretations of what may constitute Blended Learning.

In the last submission we drew attention to the work of Francescucci & Foster (2013:80) who cite work that suggests that the portion of content delivered either online or electronically must be less than 80% but more than 20% for a course to be considered blended (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004¹⁷; Klein, Noe, & Wang, 2006¹⁸). We again suggest that this type of guidance for programme designers or colleges might be helpful in the case of Blended Learning, especially as QQI panels and providers should benchmark developments and practice against these types of indicative guidelines in order to facilitate and support innovative practice in the design and development of Blended Learning Programmes. In this regard, may we suggest that all QQI Validation and Re-validation panel members should be aware of Blended Learning and have experience in teaching or managing a programme in this delivery mode before being chosen to sit on QQI panels reviewing programmes that meet the definition of Blended Learning programmes.

Within the context of the Definition relied upon, there is a possibility that any programme which uses a Virtual Learning Environment will be considered Blended Learning. We contend that most programmes offered by Colleges in all higher education institutions in the state utilize some, if not all, of the technology enabled teaching and learning modalities identified on Pages 6 – 7 of the White Paper.

We would welcome some clarification around issues of ‘remoteness’ on Section 1.3 on pages 5/6 as some of the language seems somewhat unclear or contradictory. Likewise, we welcome the intent as specified on Page 7, that the Guidelines will provide a reference point

¹⁷ Garrison, D.R., & Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education. *Internet and Higher Education*, 7, 95–105.

¹⁸ Klein, H. J., Noe, R. A., & Wang, C. (2006). Motivation to learn and course outcomes: The impact of delivery mode, learning goal orientation and perceived barriers and enablers. *Personnel Psychology*, 59(3), 665–702.

for good practice, but caution that the Core Validation Criteria could equally be sufficient, in that most programmes utilize technology that would mean that learners will be physically remote from those identified for part of their programme of study. Clearly, students who are engaged in self-study as part of their effort hours will, by definition, be remote from other students, faculty and services in many instances.

Dimensions of Programme Design and Delivery

In our previous submission to QQI we highlighted a number of dimensions which the literature considers important (e.g. Kahn,2000¹⁹ and Kahn, 2003²⁰), in assuring the quality of such programmes, as follows:

1. Pedagogical (content, goals/objectives, design approach, methods and strategies, organization, instructional medium, evaluation);
2. Technological (infrastructure, hardware, software);
3. Interface design (page and site design, navigation, usability testing);
4. Online support (instructional/counseling support, technical support);
5. Management (maintenance of learning environment, distribution of information);
6. Resource support (online resources, offline resources);
7. Ethical (social and cultural diversity, geographical diversity, learner diversity, information accessibility, etiquette, legal issues); and
8. Institutional (academic affairs, student services)

We are pleased to see these areas are largely addressed and welcome that.

Students Resident outside Ireland

We are somewhat confused in relation to the Guidance on students who are resident outside Ireland and would welcome discussion with QQI in relation to this aspect of the Guidelines. We are unsure if Ireland means the island of Ireland or the Republic of Ireland and in the context of Blended learning we would welcome clarification regarding where or how the Transnational Policy might apply – in particular where collaborative arrangements do not apply.

¹⁹ Khan, B. H. (2000). *A framework for open, flexible and distributed learning*. Available at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED446277.pdf>

²⁰ Khan, B. (2003). A framework for open, flexible and distributed e-learning. *Elearn*, 2003(2), 1.

We have previously noted that guidelines need to be dynamic and cannot accommodate all the vagaries of every individual situation. We are pleased also that the guidelines in this Draft are somewhat more inclusive than the previous version in relation to Synchronous engagement as well as asynchronous engagement. Synchronous or Virtual Interactive Real Time Instructor led Classrooms (VIRI) are evolving modalities of teaching and learning and will likely evolve further over time.

In that context, we contend that the White Paper fails to give sufficient scope to this type of evolution in terms of engagement both now and in the future. The artificial distinction between what are referred to as 'traditional classroom' engagement and virtual engagement is, in our view unhelpful and flawed. The distinction essentially refers to and draws upon presumptions that traditional classroom interaction is a vital element of pedagogical engagement. The centrality of student engagement and teacher/student interaction is a position that HECA would strongly support, but would equally argue that the development of synchronous online technologies are a new solution to supporting interaction in the virtual classroom (Martin, 2012²¹) and should be embraced as providing greater opportunities to diverse learners. McAfee (2010) notes that online learning is becoming increasingly popular, partly because of the demand to either upskill or retrain while continuing in employment. It is of course also partly evolving as a means of widening participation in Higher Education.

HECA would strongly argue that widening participation should not be equated with lowering standards. Indeed, the opposite should be the case. Widening participation involves and should be underpinned by principles of democratisation and equity and any means of widening participation should be both evidence informed and subject to quality assurance processes, which is why we broadly welcome this initiative by QQI.

In terms of evidence, we would highlight the fact that there is a body of convincing evidence to suggest that these evolving technologies are at least an equally effective means of

²¹ Martin, F., Parker, M., & Deale, D. (2012). Examining interactivity in synchronous virtual classrooms. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(3), 228-261. Retrieved: 01, October 2017 from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1174/2253>

addressing the same need. Please refer to the work of Means et al. (2009²²), who undertook a review of the pedagogical efficacy of programmes that use educational technology and more recently that of Ward *et al.* (2010²³) who argues that Blended on-line learning, which combines asynchronous and synchronous approaches, is also effective. Hrastinski (2008²⁴) as well as Means et al. (2009) effectively argue that the essential feature underpinning effectiveness is not the setting for teaching and learning in the sense of an artificial distinction between a real time physical and virtual setting, but rather the engagement of both teachers and learners. Gavan (2015) notes that both blended and e-learning technologies offer flexible opportunities for learners including opportunities to mirror the types of interaction what was traditionally associated with 'face to face' contact. The essential difference is that such interaction may now be technologically enabled.

A significant concern in relation to the White Paper relates to the issue of the focus it has on instructional modalities rather than the ethos of programme delivery. The emphasis on Virtual Learning Environments needs re-consideration. The distinction between media (in this case technological media and on-line mainly) being used as a repository or carrier of content rather than as a component of active teaching and learning needs greater consideration in our view. In either context, learning supports or material placed on Virtual Learning Environments will almost invariably be intended to support the learning journey of students and it is difficult to envisage situations where a College would be using a repository which could not be used by students to enhance their learning and thus to the Educational Credits they can gain and in most instances this would be at a distance in modern Learning Contexts.

Any form of Blended Learning, in our view is likely to involve teaching and learning contexts where the students are encouraged to take an active role in the educational process and where teaching will be incorporated into an overall or holistic experience, characterised by the use of carefully planned activities such as collaborative work on certain tasks,

²² Means, B., Yoyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., & Jones, K. (2009). *Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies*. US Department of Education. Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development. Policy and Program Studies Service.

²³ Ward, M., Peters, G., & Shelley, K. (2010). Student and faculty perceptions of the quality of online learning experiences. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 11(3), 57-77. Retrieved: 30, September 2017 from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/867/1610>

²⁴ Hrastinski, S. (2008). What is online learner participation? A literature review. *Computers & Education*, 51(4), 1755–1765. Retrieved: 01, October 2017 from <http://www.eurodl.org/?article=500>

participation in the evaluation process, self-directed guides, whether that be through synchronous (real time) or asynchronous delivery of learning material (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003²⁵).

We are conscious that the use of educational technology has been reported to be beneficial at a range of levels. Specifically, it has been reported that it “produces multiple benefits regarding the academic performance, as well as behavioral gains such as student retention in the education, responsibility, and development of transferable skills like collaboration, communication, and problem solving” (Vasileva-Stojanovska et al, 2015:127²⁶)

This supports the findings of comprehensive review and meta-analysis of online learning studies in North America undertaken by Means, Yoyama, Murphy, Bakia, and Jones (2009), which found that on average students perform better, when part or all of their learning occurs in an online environment compared with students who are in traditional face-to-face conditions. This was also supported by a study in the University of Central Florida (UCF) which undertook a multi-year study examining the success rates of tens of thousands of their face-to-face, Blended Learning and online students. The study defined *success* as earning at least a C-grade, and the study considered college, gender, and modality. The study found that the success rates for Blended Learning were higher within each college than either fully face-to-face or fully online courses for both males and females (Dziuban et al., 2004²⁷ and Graham, 2013²⁸). This does not suggest that either traditional ‘face to face’ or exclusively ‘on line’ engagement are inferior. It simply highlights that fact that all education should be considered within the context of a continuum as suggested earlier. This is one of the reasons we suggest a more inclusive approach to the Quality Assurance of programmes along a continuum, rather than as discreet QA processes.

For example, we fully accept that programme design needs to take into consideration a range of target group considerations and characteristics, such as age, gender, ICT competence, access etc.. But likewise, this would equally apply to any programme design and validation requirements or processes. Specifically, in relation to technologically supported learning, it is easy to make assumptions that younger people who may have had

²⁵ Osguthorpe, R. T., & Graham, C. R. (2003). “Blended learning systems: Definitions and Directions” *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 4(3), 227–234

²⁶ Vasileva-Stojanovska, T., Malinovski, T., Vasileva, M., Jovevski, D., & Trajkovik, V. (2015). Impact of satisfaction, personality and learning style on educational outcomes in a blended learning environment. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 38, 127-135.

²⁷ Dziuban, C. , Hartman, J., Moskal, P., Sorg, S., & Truman, B. (2004) **Three ALN modalities: an institutional perspective**. In J.R. Bourne, J.C. Moore (Eds.), *Elements of quality online education: Into the mainstream*, Sloan Consortium, Needham, MA, pp. 127–148

²⁸ Graham, C.R. (2013) **Emerging practice and research in blended learning**. In M.J. Moore (Ed.), *Handbook of distance education* (3rd ed.), Routledge, New York, NY (2013), pp. 333–350

greater exposure to ICT in primary and secondary education as well as socially, might be expected to outperform more mature learners. However, there is some contradictory evidence around these issues. For example, Hoskins and Hooff (2005) noted that age is a predictor of achievement and somewhat surprisingly that older students do better than younger ones in online learning. However, equally Colorado and Eberle (2010²⁹) reported no differences in performance between more mature and younger learners in online environments. While we fully accept that there may well be evidence-based differences in performance or engagement in Blended learning, Hoskins and Hooff (2005) noted age as a predictor of achievement and that older students do better than younger ones in online learning. There were however no differences in performance between the old and young learners in online environments (Colorado and Eberle, 2010).

However, others (e.g. Giannousi, Vernadakis, & Derri, 2009; Means et al., 2013) have reported that younger learners are more engaged than more mature learners. There are a range of other studies that compare the effectiveness of online and face-to-face learning (e.g. Brown & Liedholm, 2002; Smith, Ferguson, & Caris, 2001), as well as student satisfaction and learning attainment (e.g. Brabazon, 2012; Dykman & Davis, 2008; Gragg, Dunning, & Ellis, 2008). However, Szeto (2014) reports that there are no definitive findings with consistent evidence available to university senior management, educators or potential students.

These discrepancies in the literature force us to return to the essential point of this submission, that the still somewhat early stage of research on the nature and efficacy of Blended Learning and the variations of definition are problematic. Recognition that this aspect of pedagogy is poorly defined does not mean that it should not be quality assured, it means the opposite, in our view, but it needs to be done in an inclusive and integrated manner within an overall educational environment.

In that regard, we return to issues of conceptualization and draw on the recent work of Tay (2016:2³⁰) who argues that Blended Learning has been variously defined in terms of a combination of:

- activities: “learning that mixes various event-based activities: self-paced learning, live e-learning, and face-to-face classrooms” (Alonso, López, Manrique, & Viñes, 2005, p. 231³¹)

²⁹ Colorado JT., & Eberle, J. (2010) 'Student demographics and success in online learning Environments'. Emporia State Research Studies, vol. 46, no.1, pp. 4-10.

³⁰ Tay, Hui Yong. (2016). Investigating Engagement in a Blended Learning Course. *Cogent Education*, 3(1), Cogent Education, 2016, Vol.3(1).

- locations: “any time a student learns at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home and at least in part through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path and/or pace” (Horn & Staker, 2011, p. 3³²);
- delivery modes: when “25% or more, but not all, of the instruction on the content to be assessed occurred online” (Means et al., 2013, p. 6³³).
- experiences: “the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 96³⁴)

This is one of the other reasons we argue that conceptualising Blended Learning as a discreet ‘delivery mode’ with a focus on activities or location etc., is a limiting and limited conceptualisation. While we accept that it is necessary to try to understand the ‘elements’ that typically describe Blended Learning, we would strongly contend that Dewey’s notion of an educative experience is a much more useful way of understanding Blended Learning and understanding it within the context of the overall educative experience - the continuum referred to earlier (Dewey, 1938³⁵).

Dewey’s essential point is that that any experience must be understood in the context of the interaction between the learner and the environment in which both teaching and learning occurs. This means that we should always consider the environment, be that the external (“objective”, p. 42) or personal (“internal”, p. 42) environment in which the learner operates. Clearly the environment in the context of blended learning is a continuum of locations and resources as well as internal elements within the teacher and student personal domains. Relying exclusively on the Garrison and Kanuka’s definition, therefore, artificially limits Blended Learning as the purposeful integration of on-line learning experience with face-to-face learning.

³¹ Alonso, F., López, G., Manrique, D., & Viñes, J. M. (2005). An instructional model for web- based e-learning education with a blended learning process approach. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 36, 217–235.

³² Horn, M. B., & Staker, H. (2011). *The rise of K-12 blended learning*. Innosight Institute. Retrieved December 2, 2014, from <http://www.innosightinstitute.org/mediaroom/publications/educationpublications>

³³ Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., & Bakia, M. (2013). The e ctiveness of online and blended learning: A meta- analysis of the empirical literature. *Teachers College Record*, 115(3), 1–47.

³⁴ Garrison, D. R., & Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7, 95–105. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2004.02.001>

³⁵ Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience & education*. New York, NY: Kappa Delta Pi.

All and any online interactions have been evidenced as being a significant component of pedagogy, contributing to the attainment of intended learning outcomes in online learning contexts (Ravenna, Foster, & Bishop, 2012³⁶). Indeed, the ability for students (especially those geographically distanced from educational centres) to communicate synchronously with lecturers or peers may partly explain the fact that there is reasonably consistent evidence that blended learning approaches are valued by students (Francescucci & Foster, 2013) – especially in systems which facilitate direct engagement with lecturers. Interaction has been found to facilitate peer rapport between online and face-to-face students in a blended synchronous learning mode (Szeto and Cheng, 2014³⁷). One of the key reasons for combining asynchronous and synchronous learning within blended learning approaches is that there are acknowledged challenges in asynchronous approaches when they are used alone, as there are in any form of teaching and learning.

For example, it is often difficult to engage remote motivated learners, who may have chosen online study because of work and family obligations (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010³⁸), meaning they have less time for their studies. In the case of asynchronous methodologies, Cunningham (2014³⁹) noted that there is a reported reluctance of some online students to participate actively in asynchronous discussion forums such as Moodle-based learning platforms. This apparent lack of engagement in the course meant that these students were not interacting. There was little rapport between the teacher and the students and none at all between the students. Therefore, we welcome any guidance which will facilitate the quality assurance of such educational endeavours and take due cognizance of the process of teaching and learning rather than the medium through which teaching and learning occurs.

³⁶ Ravenna, G., Foster, C., & Bishop, C. (2012). Increasing student interaction online: A review of the literature. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 20(2), 177-203.

³⁷ Szeto, E., & Cheng, A. Y. (2014). Towards a framework of interactions in a blended synchronous learning environment: what effects are there on students' social presence experience? *Interactive Learning Environments*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2014.881391>. Advance online publication.

³⁸ James, R., Krause, K., & Jennings, C. (2010). *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009*. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, 81 p.

³⁹ Cunningham, U. (2014). Teaching the disembodied: othering and activity systems in a blended synchronous learning situation. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 15(6). Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org>.

While we have generally concentrated on macro level feedback within this submission, we would note some specific examples within the document where we have specific concerns and in that regard, there may be some overlap in terms of what has already been said above.

For example, on Page 4 the draft guideline indicates that the document is not intended ‘to cover any programme where the sole connection between the provider and the learner is online learning’

Please refer to our commentary relating to what we believe is a somewhat artificial dichotomy between the categorization of programmes as being exclusively on-line and blended. However, we would ask if there is an intent on the part of QQI to follow up this White Paper with a similar Paper on Exclusively On- Line Paper? If so what would the key differences relate to?

On Page 7, we would ask that the sentence including reference to ‘problematic for blended learning’ be clarified. We suggest, as the White Paper itself does in general terms, that Blended Learning is flexible, and a useful means of broadening access to and participation in education and the future.

On Page 8. ‘A provider moving into on-line learning and other blended learning formats’ – can we please have clarity on what is meant here, please.

On Page 21, it is stated that..... ‘programmes are fully designed before being offered to learners’. We assume that in this context that requirements for programme design refers to the validation or re-validation processes but that specific resources relating to later stages of a multi stage programme would be put in place on an incremental basis following commencement of Stage 1 of programme delivery.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the use of technology is not a panacea for all ills in terms of widening educational access or participation and thus the development of guidance to support the teaching and learning mandate of Higher Education Institutions using technology enabled and supported education is welcome, but we would suggest that the specific Draft paper might benefit from further consideration and refinement and we might suggest that it might be better titled as a White Paper on Technologically Supported or Enabled Education as a more inclusive and embracing term. Given the added value that technology potentially provides to both teaching and learning, such guidance should be enabling and supportive of educational communities of learning and promote educational innovation as well as excellence. We believe that was the intent of the group who developed the Draft to this stage.

We sincerely hope that these comments contribute to your deliberations on these Draft guidelines. As indicated, we fully recognise the difficulties in developing guidance in this evolving area and if there are further ways in which HECA can continue to contribute to this process, we will be pleased to do so.

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