



Mary Immaculate College
Response to Draft White Paper on Topic-Specific Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines for Blended Learning
Submitted, 3rd November 2017.

Mary Immaculate College welcomes the publication of this draft White Paper and the general guidelines and specific responsibilities for providers therein regarding the quality assurance of blended learning provision. We welcome the focus that the White Paper adopts in raising awareness of issues that are specifically pertinent to the blended teaching and learning context in order to increase efforts towards effectiveness, efficiency and transparency.

Provision is made for providers to establish internal systems of quality assurance while having regard to QQI's statutory Core and Topic-Specific quality assurance guidelines to inform them, which strikes an appropriate balance between central leadership and local interpretation, innovation and delivery. Reference to the European Association for Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) self-assessment tool is useful as a benchmark of the effectiveness of current and future blended and online offerings.

Overall, the procedures outlined in Sections Three to Five are positive and reflective of our practice and experience as a provider. We endorse the assertion beneath Section 3 that quality blended learning provision should be part of a provider's vision supported by a deliberate and approved strategy. We also acknowledge the potential for reputational risk in not sufficiently planning for, and appreciating the complexities and pedagogical distinctions of blended learning modalities.

We note that the description of blended learning used beneath Section 2 primarily focuses on delivery aspects and while delivery is crucial, focus on the delivery aspect alone could unintentionally perpetuate the misconception that traditional content and resources as repackaged and put online can represent quality blended learning provision. Therefore, as a measure of quality, we would also include the description outlined by Garrison and Kanuka (2004) that blended learning "represents a fundamental reconceptualization and reorganization of the teaching and learning dynamic, starting with various specific contextual needs and contingencies (e.g., discipline, developmental level, and resources)".

We support the position that providers should work to ensure that quality management arrangements for blended learning provision are supported by modern and fit-for-purpose organisational infrastructure and processes. We welcome the clear imperative in Section 2 for providers to understand distinctive demands associated with this provision on current organisational, IT and administrative resources and supports. In particular, identification of the need to have adequate and sustainable development timelines, staffing, infrastructure and procedures in place, as articulated on pages 8, 10, 21, 22 and 23, is to be welcomed.

From an operational perspective, the White Paper recognises that blended learning provision is a specialist area and emphasises the need for induction and ongoing CPD for all staff involved. In terms of processes, the encouragement of shared and collaborative provision, protections for enrolled local and international distance learners, emphasis on quality assurance of providers, and independent evaluation of teaching and learning processes, are all welcome.

Judicious direction is likely to be required in relation to procedure 3.1.4 which explicitly identifies providers' requirements to systematically address "arrangements for assuring compliance with any legal or statutory obligations" including data protection, copyright and intellectual property rights issues.

Mary Immaculate College welcomes the publication of this Draft White Paper, and we note in particular the positive direction it takes, as well as the specific points mentioned here, which we hope to see mainstreamed in future policy and practice.