NCI Response to QQI white paper on QA guidelines for Blended Learning

NCI welcomes the publication of this white paper and supports its intent to assure that the teaching and learning experience for learners, regardless of the context is a 'positive quality experience, with quality assurance, improvement and enhancement' in place.

NCI has offered programmes using blended learning since 2010, establishing at the time its standards for blended learning. NCI defines "Blended Learning" as: *the integrated combination of a number of pedagogic approaches – usually traditional learning with e-learning approaches*. In this definition the important words are **integrated combination** - this means that blended learning is not a collection or mixture of pedagogic approaches - it is the planned and appropriate use of different media, learning environments and teaching scenarios to deliver more engaging and effective learning experiences. To date, this approach has been integrated into its existing quality assurance procedures for programme development, delivery, staff development and learner support. The following observations are made in that context.

Definition and Distinction between Traditional, Blended and Online Learning

As technology evolves ever more speedily, we do have a concern that having quality assurance guidelines for 'blended learning' however the concept is defined, is now somewhat of an artificial divide between what might be considered the 'traditional' face to face classroom and those employing blended learning approaches. We also contend that the exclusion of programmes where the 'sole connection between the provider and the learner is online learning' from these guidelines. Taking the guidelines in the round, we are unsure as to the difference between the requirements of what are considered 'blended learning' programmes and 'online' programmes would be. The organisational, programme and experience contexts as outlined in the White Paper would appear to apply to all programmes – traditional, 'blended' or 'fully online'.

We are conscious that these guidelines are intended to apply to the sector as a whole, however we would argue that by publishing additional specific guidelines in this area, the intent *to 'focus on what is distinctive, avoid duplication or version control',* particularly for providers of QQI awarded programmes may not be achieved. We argue that by implementing the requirements of the core statutory quality assurance guidelines, sector specific guidelines for private/independent providers[1], programme validation criteria[2] and Assessment and Standards[3] to all provision, these guidelines will also be appropriately met.

Notwithstanding this, we do acknowledge that these guidelines pose additional and explicit questions that will enhance the articulation of existing and implied policy and procedure.

Learners outside of Ireland

We acknowledge the complexities that can arise when provision is offered outside of the State which are considered under already published guidelines on transnational provision. However, in the context of the guidelines for blended learning, we believe that a distinction should be made between a stated intent of a provider to target a market outside of the State and to deliver blended

[1]QQI (2016) **Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines** developed by QQI for Independent/Private Providers coming to QQI on a Voluntary Basis
[2]QQI (2016); Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training
[3] QQI(2013); Assessment & Standards, Revised 2013

learning programmes outside of the State and the situation where an individual may choose to enrol on a blended or online programme offered by a provider. It is incumbent on the provider to ensure that information relating to the programme, particularly with respect to recognition of specific qualifications is published. However, the learner also has a right to enrol on a programme (subject to meeting entry requirements) and obligation to engage with the participation norms of that programme.

We assume 'Ireland' to mean the Republic of Ireland but would welcome clarification on this matter.

Programme Outcomes

We note in 4.1.2 the requirement that all 'online content is subject to approval' and ongoing quality assurance. A definition of 'online content' would be useful. Whilst acknowledging the intent to assure the integrity of content and its appropriateness for the level of the programme, the spectrum of content could range from pre-packaged original content, the use of content developed by others (subject to licensing), the development of content to support 'flipped classrooms' to the delivery of the 'traditional lecture' using synchronous delivery.

The nature of what is meant by *approval* here also requires clarification –*the how* of approval as part of validation of a programme, approval locally by management on an annual basis or peer review? The *what* of approval also requires clarification - - that content meets the requirements of the module descriptor as approved, that the content is factually accurate, that it is designed appropriately from a pedagogic perspective or that the views or opinions of a faculty member are 'approved'?

This may be problematic in the context of the academic freedom of the faculty member and in the interest of consistency, extension of similar 'approval' of content to face-to face environments. An overly burdensome approval process will also impact on innovation and the adoption of blended learning approaches. Whilst noting that the guidelines are not intended to be prescriptive, this is open to interpretation and an elaboration of QQI's intent, particularly where QQI is the awarding body would be helpful.

On behalf of NCI

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