The Open University in Ireland

Response to QQI White Paper – Topic-specific Quality Assurance Guidelines on statutory quality assurance guidelines for blended learning (Version 2).

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1. The Open University in Ireland welcomes the opportunity to comment on QQI's White Paper on statutory quality assurance guidelines for blended learning.

2. We are responding on behalf of the institution, as an independent or private provider, and we are happy for our submission to be published.

3. We have some specific comments to make on certain sections of the guidelines which we outline here:

4. We consider the Guidelines appropriate and sensible overall. We believe that the Guidelines should reflect best practice.

5. We do have some specific comments to make around the terminology, particularly the use of 'blended learning' and 'online learning'. It would be helpful if the document separated out 'blended learning' from 'online learning'. There are many examples in the document where 'blended' or 'blended learning' is used in the same sentence as 'online learning' as though online was an example of blended. This is an area that The Open University is discussing with the Higher Education Funding Council for England in relation to the Teaching Excellence Framework. Blended learning seeks to find a way to deliver the face-to-face world at a distance through the use of computing. Online learning, as we understand it, is truly about designing an experience from scratch which delivers the same results but is not intended as a mimic of a face-to-face experience.

6. To give an example, in a blended learning environment students might be set an assignment which they work on offline and submit electronically to be then read offline by their tutor for discussion at a tutorial. In our online environment assessment is used to trigger learning and understanding in the student. The response given by the student may be self-assessed, computer-marked or marked in a more traditional way with feedback given electronically. Feedback is however designed to feed forward so

that the student uses the assignment to develop their skills for the next piece of work. The way that the OU approaches it, assessment is a core part of the teaching, not solely a test of what has been absorbed.

7. In an online environment teaching is normally delivered asynchronously with the materials and resources specifically planned to provoke interactions and from the student. A considerable amount of teaching time is actually spent before the student engages with the materials or activities in learning design work. A blended learning environment where lectures are delivered by video and materials via online books is essentially non-interactive and assimilative. It attempts to replace in some respects traditional forms of teaching, and will need to be supported with additional engagement activities otherwise it is really just independent study.

8. The document refers to 'contact time'. Again this is a feature which distinguishes 'blended' from 'online'. In a blended environment, most of the teaching will still be synchronous and the amount of time a student spends being taught aligns with the amount of time the lecturer spends teaching. In an online environment, most of the 'teaching' is done before the student engages, and most of the 'being taught' is done without a lecturer actually being present. Only in specific situations will the design of the teaching be such that the lecturer and the student are present to each other at the same time. The length of time each spends on the 'teaching' activity is therefore not directly linked and caution must be exercised when measuring 'contact time' in an online environment to determine whether you are measuring the lecturer's time or the student's time. The amount of time a student spends on the 'teaching' is determined by the 'lecturer' as part of the learning design. It is a conscious and deliberative plan, though the design might also allow for responsive feedback to a student which is not pre-planned.

9. Whilst the Guidelines currently provides a useful list for Higher Education Institutions on how they might organise themselves and approach blended learning, the Guidelines might also benefit from an annex with an example of how an institution has successfully approached developing and delivering blended learning (and pitfalls to avoid).

10. Annex 2 refers to useful resources which includes the OU but the link takes it to the OU home page which is fine – readers can pick up something from qualification and module descriptions re blended learning delivery – but not sure that would be enough for an institution either starting out on this path or struggling with it.

11. The Open University in Ireland is happy to be involved in any further consultations on this topic.