Reengagement Panel Report

Assessment of QA Procedures for Blended Learning

Part 1   Details of provider

1.1   Applicant Provider

Registered Business/Trading Name:	St Nicholas Montessori College Ireland
Address:	Block C, Century Court, George's St Upper, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin
Date of Application:	08 July 2020
Date of resubmission of application:	
Date of evaluation:	
Date of (virtual) site visit (if applicable):	24th August 2020
Date of recommendation to the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee:	15 October 2020

1.2   Profile of provider

Saint Nicholas Montessori College Ireland (SNMCI) was incorporated as a Company Limited by Guarantee in 1978, and is a registered charity operating on a not-for-profit basis. SNMCI has been a higher education provider in Ireland since 1994. The College was first recognized by the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) and subsequently by the Higher Education Training and Awards Council (HETAC) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

SNMCI delivers a range of QQI validated programmes of education and training, including a Higher Certificate, Higher Diploma and Bachelor programmes from NFQ 6 – 8 in Montessori Education and Early Years Montessori Education. A diverse student body includes full and part-time learners from around Ireland, and an increasing number of international students. SNMCI is an independent college, and students are fee- paying.

SNMCI has used learning technologies to support and enable in-class teaching and learning for many years. The COVID-19 pandemic has required SNMCI to implement aspects of its approach to blended learning early as part of the College's response to the emergency. However, the College's introduction of Blended Learning is planned, and part of a wider strategy inclusive of the College's aspirations for transnational provision, which will be applied for at a later date.

Part 2   Panel Membership

Name	Role of panel member	Organisation
David Denieffe	Chair	Registrar, Institute of Technology Carlow
Dr. Catherine Peck	QA Expert & Secretary	Independent Education Consultant
Dr. Silvia Gallagher	Blended Learning Expert	Research Fellow, Trinity College Dublin

Part 3   Findings of the Panel

3.1   Summary Findings

The panel commends SNMCI for bringing forward a learner centred set of application documents within its submission for approval of draft QA procedures for blended learning. The College's application emphasises the importance of integrating the established philosophy and approach to teaching and learning at the College into the delivery of programmes delivered in blended modes. The dedication of College staff to evolving systems and processes, and to implementing best practice in the delivery of programmes in blended learning modes was apparent to the panel during the virtual site visit.

At the conclusion of the virtual site visit, the panel identified limited and discrete issues that needed to be addressed by SNMCI in order to demonstrate the College's comprehensive alignment to QQI's Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes (2018). These are listed in Section 5.1 of this report as proposed mandatory changes.

The panel availed of its option to defer its recommendation, allowing the provider a period of up to six weeks to address these. The panel reconvened to review evidence of implementation of the proposed mandatory changes submitted by SNMCI on the 29th of September, 2020. The panel was of the view that SNMCI had comprehensively addressed these, and proceeded to recommend approval of SNMCI's draft QA procedures for Blended Learning.

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

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

Part 4   Evaluation of draft QA Procedures for Blended Learning submitted by St Nicholas Montessori College Ireland

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

Panel Findings:

The panel's evaluation of SNMCI's quality assurance procedures for blended learning was closely guided by QQI's Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes (2018). The guidelines outline expectations pertaining to the Organisational Context, Programme Context and Learner Context.

Organisational Context
Within this dimension of the guidelines, providers are required to demonstrate that policies, regulations and processes are fit-for-purpose in the context of blended learning. SNMCI has undertaken a gap analysis against QQI's guidelines, and appropriately identified that existing processes will need to be adapted to account for the implications of provision in blended learning mode. However, at the time of the site visit, the updating of several key policies and procedures was planned, but not clearly mapped or demonstrated within the documentation submitted. The panel therefore required SNMCI to move forward with implementing the necessary amendments, and identified a proposed mandatory change pertaining to this. This required SNMCI to submit documentation that indicated the key process areas to be amended, and the timeframe within which these amendments would be completed. During the deferral period, SNMCI completed a comprehensive review of its QA documentation, mapping updates and amendments throughout appropriately to the implications of blended learning delivery. SNMCI additionally highlighted the continually evolving nature of QA within the organisation in its resubmission to the panel.

Within the context of SNMCI's broader processes, the panel also noted that instructional design is a function that appropriately operates under academic oversight and management. QQI's guidelines for the Governance and Management of QA require that a provider's governance and management structures enforce an appropriate separation between corporate and academic functions within the organisation. At the time of the virtual site visit, this role reported directly to the provider's CEO. To address this inconsistency, the panel required SNMCI to review the current reporting line for the role of instructional designer. When the panel reconvened following the deferral period of six weeks, this had been addressed. A description of the role of SNMCI's Instructional Designer was submitted to the panel, with a reporting line specified to the Director of Quality and Academic Affairs.

A further requirement under this dimension of the guidelines is that a provider's recruitment policies and processes allow for online requirements, and that processes for the appointment, induction, training, professional development and appraisal of teaching and support staff are specific to blended and online learning. Moreover, providers must demonstrate a planned approach to the appointment of specialist

staff to support the provider's blended learning strategy. The panel acknowledges and commends SNMCI's proactivity in appointing an instructional designer to offer specialist support to curriculum development and teaching and learning practice in this area. However, during discussions at the virtual site visit the panel was unable to clearly ascertain how SNMCI anticipated the implementation of blended learning would impact other existing and new roles in the organisation, including in key areas such as programme leadership, teaching and learner supports. The panel therefore identified an additional proposed mandatory change for SNMCI relevant to this. This required SNMCI to consider and articulate within its documentation how the adoption of blended learning as mode of provision would impact the responsibilities of personnel in these areas. Following the six week deferral period, SNMCI submitted documentation reflecting this had been reviewed and considered. Adaptations to staff roles due to the implications of blended learning delivery were mapped against all key roles within the organisation.

Programme Context
Within this dimension of the guidelines, providers are required to demonstrate that learning and teaching practices are informed by best practice in blended and online provision. The panel acknowledges the commitment to learner centred and principled teaching and learning at SNMCI, and the prominence of pedagogy within the provider's documentation. However, the pedagogic frameworks identified by SNMCI within the documentation were relatively narrowly focused. During discussion at the virtual site visit, representatives of SNMCI affirmed that the College is exploring the potential of using alternative frameworks for learning design and online pedagogy to inform their practice, for example, the ABC approach to curriculum design informed by Laurillard's Conversational Framework, and principles underpinning Universal Design for Learning. The panel offered an item of specific advice to the College pertaining to this, encouraging SNMCI to continue the development it has commenced in this area. Specifically the panel encourages SNMCI to consider the ready availability of training resources and established communities of practice in the national context to support this. A further requirement under this dimension of the guidelines is that processes must be in place to ensure that all online learning materials and media are subject to informed peer comment, and meet clear quality standards. The panel noted that this requirement had been considered and integrated into SNMCI's procedures.

Learner Context
Within this dimension of the guidelines, providers are required to demonstrate that appropriate and sufficient learning resources are available to support online learning and remote study, and that there are appropriate interventions and mechanisms to identify and support learners who may be struggling with online learning. Learners are provided with a comprehensive range of supports at SNMCI, and benefit from a highly personalised approach enabled by the College's relatively small scale. However, the panel noted that although Policies and Procedures for dealing with instances of Academic Misconduct are clearly stated within the QA processes, limited documentation or resources associated with Academic Integrity were visible. The panel was of the view that particularly within the context of blended learning, SNMCI learners would benefit from further support and enhancement in this area. The panel has noted an item of specific advice pertaining to this for SNMCI.

Part 5 Mandatory Changes to QA Procedures for Blended Learning and Specific Advice

5.1 Mandatory Changes

5.1.1 Demonstrate how the implementation of blended learning as a mode of provision will impact on the wider QA processes of the organisation. Specifically, indicate the key policies and procedures requiring amendment and the timeframe for completion of this.

5.1.2 The instructional design function within the organisation must operate under academic oversight and management. Therefore, the current reporting line for the instructional designer needs to be reviewed, in which this role reports directly to the CEO.

5.1.3 Articulate how the responsibilities of existing and new key roles within the organisation are specifically impacted by the adoption of blended learning as a mode of provision, including programme managers, lecturers, the learner support officer and student engagement officer.

The panel reconvened to review evidence of implementation of the proposed mandatory changes submitted by SNMCI on the 29th of September, 2020. The panel was of the view that SNMCI had comprehensively addressed these, and proceeded to recommend approval of SNMCI's draft QA procedures for Blended Learning.

5.2 Specific Advice

5.2.1 As the College's approach to blended learning evolves, consider alternative pedagogical approaches that may inform work within the College, and the availability of training resources and communities of practice in the national context to support these.

5.2.2 Develop an Academic Integrity Policy and supporting procedures to complement and counterbalance the Academic Misconduct Policy. This should represent the College's approach to educating learners about academic integrity, and how to avoid academic misconduct.

5.2.3 Further develop the QA documentation for Blended Learning to ensure alignment, cohesion and coherence. For example, ensure consistent terminology is used in relation to areas/processes including induction, procurement and contingency planning.

Although SNMCI were not required to address the items of specific advice within the six week deferral period, the panel highlight that SNMCI also submitted evidence that due consideration had also been given to the panel's comments in Section 5.2. This note included specific adjustments to the existing Academic Misconduct Policy, which was additionally renamed (as an Academic Integrity Policy) to underscore the mission and values of the College.

Part 6   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 Saint Nicholas Montessori College Ireland.

Name:

Date: 29th September 2020

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

Document	Related to
No further documents were provided	

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

Name	Role/Position
Dr Nicholas Breakwell	CEO
Ann King	Director of Quality and Academic Affairs
Steve Welsh	Instructional Designer
Edris Azizi	I.T. Manager
Roger Galligan	Chairman
Siobhan O'Reilly	Programme Director
Jennifer Brush	Programme Director
Pauline Murphy	Programme Manager
Stephen Corkery	Examinations Officer and Data Protection Officer
Audrey Johnston	Learner Support Officer
Tara O'Leary	Programme Director
Mackenzie Young	Admissions and Student Engagement

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

Tel: +353 (0) 1 230 0080
email: info@smsi.ie
www.smsi.ie

October 1st 2020

To:
Quality and Qualifications Ireland
26/27 Denzille Lane,
Dublin 2.

Re: Report of the Independent Panel on the Assessment of QA Procedures for Blended Learning

St Nicholas Montessori College Ireland (SNMCI) would like to place on record our thanks to the Panel for their professional and collegial approach during the 'virtual' on-site visit (Aug 24th) and for their critical feedback.

Taking the opportunity offered to address the *'limited and discrete'* issues that emerged from that meeting has allowed us to more clearly demonstrate our on-going commitment to alignment with *QQI's Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes* (2018).

Following the reconvening of the panel to review our response to the areas identified in the initial panel report, we are now very happy with the decision of the Panel and we look forward to our application and the panel's report being submitted to the QQI PAEC meeting.

Yours faithfully

Dr. Nicholas Breakwell
CEO

Factual Accuracy Feedback Form

Provider: St Nicholas Montessori College Ireland
Application: Assessment of QA Procedures for Blended Learning
Date: Sep 30th 2020

Provider feedback		Panel use only	
St Nicholas Montessori College Ireland is satisfied with the factual accuracy of the Panel Report and has no suggested corrections.			
Stated in Report[1]	Suggested Correction	Correction accepted? *Yes, No, Partially*	Rationale Where Suggested Correction Partially Accepted or Not Accepted

Dr Nicholas Breakwell CEO
Ann King Director of Quality and Academic Affairs

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[1] Please identify the relevant text, paragraph and page number