**QQI Approval of Provider QA Procedures**

**Blended and / or Fully Online Learning**

**Gap Analysis Tool and Action Plan**

**For Provider Use**

**Introduction**

*Higher education and further education providers are required to ‘have regard’ to* [*QQI Quality Assurance Guidelines for Blended and Fully Online Programmes*](https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2023-12/statutory-quality-assurance-guidelines-for-providers-of-blended-and-fully-online-programmes-2023_1.pdf) *when writing their own procedures for quality assuring programmes of education and training which are to involve the use of online modes of delivery and / or assessment.*

*The guidelines are not intended as a ‘how to’ manual for providers on the establishment of QA procedures. Rather, it is up to providers to supplement their internal quality system with additional strategy, policy, procedures, review and governance relevant to online provision.*

*A panel acting on behalf of QQI will evaluate the provider’s draft procedures using QQI QA Guidelines as a reference but not as criteria. It is important that the panel will be able to see that the guidelines have been used and applied in a manner appropriate to the specific context of the applicant provider and, crucially, its intended scope of provision (see part 2 below).*

*When conducting a gap analysis between their draft QA procedures and the QA Guidelines, a provider should use the questions set out below for each of the guideline sections. The answers should help identify state of readiness to offer programmes within the intended scope of provision and also what work needs to be done before they can submit their QA procedures for approval.*

*It is important that a provider’s draft procedures go through internal consultation and governance prior to being submitted to QQI for approval. As moving to online provision for the long term has considerable implications for a provider, in terms of change and cost, it is critical that the quality system to support it be considered and approved by corporate and academic governance.*

**Gap Analysis – why?**

*An honest and meaningful self-assessment is an indicator of a well-functioning quality assurance system. Providers are encouraged to engage in this gap analysis exercise, not for compliance with a QQI requirement, but to ensure the organisation is equipped for and can effectively develop and deliver online programmes, of whatever blend and online composition.*

*When starting this exercise, it is important to remember the purpose of the QA Approval process: i.e.*

*QQI is keen to ensure that the provider has*

1. *done a genuine assessment of its own situation based on its expertise and experience, to identify* 
   1. *potential for effective uses of online methodologies to enhance the quality of its programmes.*
   2. *any potential areas of vulnerability – institutional or programmatic, arising from ineffective use of online methodologies which could impact on the quality of a programme.*
2. *considered its resource base relative to the demands of online provision[[1]](#footnote-1) and made a genuine assessment of the potential viability and effectiveness of online provision.*
3. *with reference to all relevant QQI QA guidelines, amended its QA policies and procedures to capture and disseminate good practice and to address any identified vulnerabilities.*

*It is acknowledged that the use of online methodologies will vary from provider to provider and even from programme to programme. In some cases, providers will just use synchronous classes / webinars to supplement and complement primarily onsite teaching. At the other end of the spectrum, providers will have fully online programmes where there is no onsite contact between provider and learners. In the middle there will be varying blends of onsite, synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning. The demands on a provider’s resourcing, expertise and quality assurance will vary accordingly. Context will be a significant factor in any evaluation of the provider’s application for approval and clarity on same will be essential.*

*When evaluating the provider’s application for QA approval for online provision, QQI will be looking to see that the updated quality assurance procedures demonstrate:*

* ***Enhanced governance*** *– Corporate and academic oversight for areas of significant decision making relevant to online learning. This should include informed and independent views on the implications of using online modes.*
* ***Clarity****: at a minimum, a policy on online learning should make clear:*
  + *What constitutes online learning for you as a provider[[2]](#footnote-2). Is an onsite element important or do you envisage fully online programmes as probable i.e. blended or fully online?*
  + *Why online learning is being proposed as a teaching methodology? What is / are the imperatives behind the proposal – learner demand, commercial opportunity, convenience, staff demand, effectiveness, expansion etc?*
  + *Who is it for i.e. for what learner profile(s) will your online provision be suitable.*
  + *Who is it not for i.e. for what learner profile(s) will your online provision not be suitable.*
  + *Which of your current programmes are suitable for conversion to online learning.[[3]](#footnote-3)*
  + *How your organisation will support and maintain additional requirements for online provision and e-learning.*[[4]](#footnote-4)
  + *What technology infrastructure for the virtual learning environment and technology-enhanced learning tools do you propose to use?*
* ***QA methodology*** *to know, in the context of future online programmes*
* *What’s working and what isn’t – institutional capacity and programmatic suitability*
* *What learners think of their online programme experience and supports available*
* *How staff are prepared and supported to use online methods for teaching*
* *How similar programmes compare and contrast (benchmarking)*
* *If resources - human, financial, technological and physical, are adequate*
* ***Clarity and accessibility*** *in policy and procedure*
* *For staff*
* *For learners*
* *For compliance with legal or statutory obligations such as GDPR, PEL, professional body requirements, regulatory considerations, Intellectual property/copyright/licencing requirements*

**Gap Analysis – what?**

*Providers seeking approval for blended/online learning are being asked to do a gap analysis with reference to:*

1. [*QQI Quality Assurance Guidelines for Blended and Fully Online Programmes*](https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2023-12/statutory-quality-assurance-guidelines-for-providers-of-blended-and-fully-online-programmes-2023_1.pdf) *(Topic), 2023*
2. [*QQ##I Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (Core)*](https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/qg-1-core-statutory-quality-assurance-guidelines.pdf)*, 2016*

*While the topic-specific QA guidelines are primary for this purpose, it is important to remember that almost all aspects of provision covered by the Core guidelines will be impacted by a move to online learning. Hence it is important to consider both sets of guidelines.*

*On the assumption that the provider already has approval against the Core QA Guidelines, this gap analysis tool will follow the structure of the topic guidelines.*

**Part 1 Provider Details**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Provider Name: |  |
| Person completing this gap analysis:  (Name and job title) |  |
| Contact phone: |  |
| Contact email address: |  |
| Date: |  |

**Part 2 – Intended Scope of Provision**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Planned Programme Mode to include** | **Tick** ü**one or more** |
| Blended – Onsite + Synchronous Only |  |
| Blended – Onsite + Synchronous and Asynchronous |  |
| Fully Online – Synchronous Only, National |  |
| Fully Online -Synchronous + Asynchronous - National |  |
| Fully Online -Synchronous + Asynchronous – National and International |  |

**Part 3 Gap Analysis with reference to QQI QA Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes**

|  |
| --- |
| **Blended and Fully Online Learning Guidelines - Section 1 Organisational Context** |

| ***1. Strategy Management and Implementation Plans*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question.*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Has the organisation documented and approved a* ***Strategy******for Online Learning[[5]](#footnote-5)****?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Does the Strategy include a clear explanation of how online provision is defined for your provider?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Does the Strategy address the limits of what will constitute online provision, in terms of programme numbers, disciplines, learner numbers and geography?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Have the contingent implications been identified and addressed in the strategy?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is the strategy underpinned by relevant and supportive market research?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Does the Strategy demonstrate the organisation’s understanding of the resource implications (human and infrastructural) of using online modes and its commitment to address and resource those implications?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there clear criteria / principles informing decision making of when to use / not use online modes of delivery and / or assessment?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Has the organisation’s QA Manual been adapted to incorporate the implications of developing, resourcing, delivering, supporting, assessing, and reviewing & monitoring programmes with an online element(s)?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is responsibility for managing online provision clearly allocated to appropriate leadership role(s)?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Have the benefits of remote learning been clearly articulated? Have the potential risks been identified and, where relevant, included in the Risk Register?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***2. Policies, Regulations and Administrative Processes*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question.*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Has the strategy been translated into one or more of the following: policy, procedure, regulation, administrative processes, to ensure adherence? Give examples.* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Has information on good practice, standards and quality in online provision been made available to staff charged with implementing systems and programmes?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is there policy / procedure providing guidance to programme developers as to what should be included in programme documents to address the implications of using online modes for teaching, learning and assessment?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Have marketing and admission processes been adapted to suit remote learners?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Have regulatory implications arising for online provision been accounted for in internal policy and processes e.g. child protection arrangements, equality of opportunity, intellectual property, data privacy and GDPR, jurisdictional issues for transnational learners?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is access to administrative processes and support facilities, normally available to students onsite, also available to students accessing a programme remotely?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Have the implications of remote submission of assessments been accounted for in assessment procedures?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are staff and learners provided with awareness training on academic integrity? Does this include information on the benefits and risks associated with artificial intelligence?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there processes in place to confirm identity of learners, in situations where there is a risk of academic malpractice relating to personation?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Where electronic proctoring systems are used, are there GDPR compliant systems in place to manage their use?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Has the organisation sustainable access to expertise in instructional design and educational technology?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is learner feedback on the quality of online provision and supports collected and used for improvement? How?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Will new / modified quality assurance procedures relevant to online provision be systematically monitored and modified as required? Who is responsible for this?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***3. Finances, Infrastructure and Resources*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question.*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe desired outcome*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Is there an approved budget for establishing / resourcing infrastructure for online provision? What timescale does the budget cover?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Has the organisation selected and approved a particular software, hardware and media infrastructure to support online provision? Have the rationale for and implications of this choice been discussed with academic governance?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *When selecting an LMS[[6]](#footnote-6) / VLE[[7]](#footnote-7) and associated technology, were the following considerations included and tested:*  * *Reliability* * *Accessibility* * *Security against data breaches / hacking* * *GDPR* * *Tech Support* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *When selecting and appointing suppliers of tech. infrastructure and software, were Service Level Agreements (SLAs) made?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Do SLAs provide for*     1. *ongoing tech. support*    2. *contingency arrangements in the event of hardware or software failure?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there opportunities to test out new platforms and tools prior to confirmation?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is there a data backup strategy and retention schedule for learner data?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there responsibilities, resources and training in place for cybersecurity?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Does the VLE facilitate monitoring of learner progression through programme material? What is the update cycle for the software?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there processes and controls which determine the tools and platforms available to programme staff to support asynchronous learning and synchronous lectures, classes, workshops etc.?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *What IT tools are available to assist in combatting plagiarism and other breaches of academic integrity?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Do learners on fully online programmes have access to a digital library, online databases and other resources applicable to their programme?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***4. Staff Training, Professional Development and Institutional Support*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question.*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Does the organisational strategy address staff training in online provision?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Do staff using synchronous methods of delivery receive training on effective use of this mode from a pedagogical perspective?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is there policy in place to ensure availability of skills and expertise in programme design / development relevant to online modes?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is there training for programme staff on assessment – design, implementation and quality assurance?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Does staff training cover academic integrity, accessibility, artificial intelligence, data privacy, cybersecurity?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Do programme development teams combine subject matter expertise with expertise in educational technology?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there ongoing supports – both internal to the provider and within communities of practice- available to teaching staff?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***5. Strategic Collaborations and Partnerships*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question.*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *If the organisation is collaborating with another provider or a company providing technical expertise and / or infrastructure, are the respective responsibilities and roles clearly specified in a contract or agreement?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *In any such arrangement, is the provider’s ultimate responsibility for quality assurance clear?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Do contracts or agreements cover the full life cycle of the collaboration?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***6. Learners Outside of Ireland*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question.*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Are there organisational criteria determining which countries the provider’s programmes can be offered in?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Will programmes to be submitted for validation identify the countries outside Ireland from which learners can be enrolled?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are the implications, if any, of online provision in a specific country identified during the programme development process?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there supports and contingency arrangements in place where issues arise for learners outside Ireland?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Have the relevant QQI Code of Practice for International Learners been considered?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Has the online learner experience been considered from the perspective of a learner outside Ireland – from initial marketing through to assessment and certification?* |  |  |  |  |

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| **Blended and Fully Online Learning Guidelines - Section 2 Programme Context** | | | | |
| ***7. Programme Outcomes*** | | | | |
| ***Gap-analysis question.*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Are programme development teams informed about organisational strategy, principles and criteria in respect of online programmes?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are programmes checked for adherence to organisational strategy, principles and criteria for online programmes before being submitted for validation?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are the programme learning outcomes impacted by the mode of delivery i.e. are the LOs achievable and demonstrable by learners accessing the programme online?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***8. Approval and Validation Processes*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question.*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Prior to submission for validation, are any relevant implications of offering a programme online ((Ref p 30 of QAGs)?) checked as having been articulated in the programme document?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Have the maximum intake sizes for fully online programmes been carefully considered vs resource implications?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are the implications of online provision, whole or in part, reflected clearly in the programme documentation e.g. duration, learner effort, teaching, learning and assessment strategies?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***9. Learning and Curriculum Design*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Is the chosen learning design model underpinning the online content aligned with the programme learning outcomes?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Does the curriculum design promote interactivity between learners and teachers and between learners?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Does the programme design promote active learner involvement in synchronous classes?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Does the asynchronous programme design and content promote active learner engagement and interactivity?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Does the programme content and LMS tools facilitate self-pacing autonomous learning and learner-monitoring of achievement?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***10. Learning Materials and Resources*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Are the digital media production tools and facilities available to create / edit online materials?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is programme material thoroughly ‘road tested’ before deployment for learners?  What is tested and by whom?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are UDL principles applied to the development of learning materials for use online?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Where Open Education Resources (OER) are used by programme staff, how is this to be managed?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***11. Assessment and Feedback Practices*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *When designing assessments, are developers encouraged to include formative assessment tools for learner feedback and self-monitoring?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *When designing assessments, are developers encouraged to include group assessments to encourage interactivity between learners?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *In blended programmes, is there guidance for programme developers on choice of online or onsite for summative assessment?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there protocols covering receipt and storage of assessments submitted online and associated feedback to learners?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there processes to verify identity of learners submitting online assessments?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are learners provided with awareness training on academic integrity?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there resources and processes for checking for plagiarism and other forms of academic malpractice?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are provider policies and procedures relating to assessment quality assurance policies and procedures / regulations available to learners attending the programme online?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are provider appeal processes and related information available to learners attending the programme online?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are time zone issues taken into account when scheduling timed assessments involving learners outside Ireland?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***12. Evaluation and Continuous Improvement*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe desired outcome*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Are data analytics available for blended and online programmes?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are programme team members aware of analytics available and how to access them?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Can different / additional data be requested by the programme team?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Does the QA Manual set out how and when data analytics information is to be used and how?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are learners on synchronous-only programmes asked about their experience?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is evaluation of online provision done as part of programme review or thematically across programmes?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Where is feedback from learners within Ireland on experience of online provision considered and acted on?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Who is responsible for change and improvement where there are issues with learner experience of online provision across a number of programmes?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there ways to engage in benchmarking with other providers with regard to learner experience and areas for improvement?* |  |  |  |  |

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| **Blended and Fully Online Learning Guidelines - Section 3 Learner Experience Context** | | | | |
| ***13. Thinking About Study*** | | | | |
| ***Gap-analysis question*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Is there guidance and information for prospective learners about the suitability for them of online provision?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is sampler programme material available online for prospective learners to check?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is there comprehensive information available to learners about (i) the programme and (ii) the implications (+ and -) of online participation in the programme, in whole or in part?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is information available to onsite learners also available to fully online learners?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***14. Learning Support and Development*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Is there is a well-resourced and professional support service for remote learners?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are support services well publicised and easy to locate online?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are programme teams and support staff familiar with each other’s roles and where those roles interface with each other?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are all learners guaranteed direct synchronous interactions with programme staff? How often? At what stage of the programme is the first such interaction?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are support services available to remote learners comparable to those available onsite?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there early warning systems for remote learners who are struggling and/or failing to engage with the programme?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is there organisation policy on learner attendance at synchronous classes / tutorials?  Are attendance requirements clearly communicated to learners?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are support services evaluated in the same way as other aspects of the programme?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***15. Equality of Opportunity*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *What measures are taken to maximise accessibility to all prospective learners?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *What issues are considered when planning for equality of opportunity / access to online provision?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is there promotion and moderation of respectful interactions online between learners and learners and staff?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are there guidelines / regulations / protocols for learner behaviour and participation in synchronous classes?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is learner engagement monitored? By whom and with what purpose?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are learners attending fully online able to access groups and activities available to onsite learners e.g. student unions, class bodies, centre facilities & resources, etc.* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Are remote learners included in learner representative bodies?* |  |  |  |  |

| ***16. Learner Experience and Outcomes*** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Gap-analysis question*** | ***Already in place? Summarise good practice*** | ***Action Required? Describe*** | ***Who Responsible*** | ***By When*** |
| 1. *Are learner engagement, progression and completion data on online programmes available for review and evaluation?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Will review and evaluation give information on the relative effectiveness of online modes in delivery of programme outcomes and objectives?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Where is learner experience feedback relating to the effectiveness of online modes considered?* |  |  |  |  |
| 1. *Is the feedback from workplace employers and their employees engaged in online training included in general learner feedback?* |  |  |  |  |

1. For conciseness, in this document we will use the term online provision to cover blended and/or fully online learning. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Consider, among other aspects – synchronous and/or asynchronous delivery, resource material for learners or active participation online, learning only or assessment also. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This might be described in terms of award type, duration, learner profile or a combination of same. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Has your senior management committed to resourcing and maintaining online provision i.e. have the organisational implications been considered and accepted. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Title as appropriate [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Learner Management System [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Virtual Learning Environment [↑](#footnote-ref-7)