Design of Programmes and Curricula for a Blended or Fully Online Environment Policy

Section 1 - Introduction

Purpose

(1) In keeping with its mission to increase accessibility to higher professional education, Hibernia College provides programmes solely within blended or online environments. This policy sets out the College's approach to the design of programmes. It also sets out the principles for curriculum design for such programmes.

Scope

To whom does the policy apply?

(2) This policy applies to Hibernia College Staff and Faculty who are designing new programmes. These individuals are referred to as programme developers in this policy.

(3) It also applies to the Academic Board (AB) and Executive Management Team (EMT) when approving a programme or a proposal to develop a programme.

In what situations does the policy apply?

(4) The policy applies in the design and development of blended or fully online programmes being prepared for provision by Hibernia College.

(5) The policy applies where the programme is intended to lead to:

  a. An award by QQI
  b. An award of a professional, regulatory or other statutory body (PRSB)
  c. An award of a body recognised as providing State qualifications leading to awards in another jurisdiction
  d. Any non-formal award made by Hibernia College including those which form part of continuing professional development for any profession

(6) This policy applies to all programmes regardless of location of provision, mode of provision or disciplinary area.

Who is responsible for implementing the policy?

(7) The Academic Board is ultimately responsible for the implementation of this policy.

Definitions

(8) Programme

A programme of education and training refers to any process by which learners may acquire knowledge, skill or competence.

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It includes courses of study or instruction, apprenticeships, training and employment. A programme offers learners the learning opportunities by which they may attain educational goals (expressed as the intended programme learning outcome) by learning activities in a learning environment. A programme is normally comprised of modules.

A programme leading to a major award will normally require a 'cohesion generating' process which integrates constituent modules so that the minimum intended programme learning outcomes are supported. The cohesion generating process should establish the epistemological and cultural identity of the programme. It should also coordinate alignment of activities with the minimum intended programme learning outcomes and introduce learners to the broader community of practice to which they aspire. (QQI (2013) Assessment and Standards Revised)

(9) Curriculum and Pedagogy

An article of Michael Young's in 2014, '[What is a curriculum and what can it do?](#)', discussed the concepts of curriculum and pedagogy. This extract has been used to present a way of thinking about curriculum and pedagogy when designing a programme: '…in designing curricula… an analytical distinction between the two concepts… [curriculum/pedagogy dichotomy] may be useful. …[T]he concept "curriculum" refers to the knowledge that it is hoped [learners] will acquire by the end of a course. In contrast, pedagogy refers to the activities that teachers devise for their [learners] to enable them to acquire the knowledge specified by the curriculum.'

(10) Module

As set out in [Assessment and Standards](#), a module is a programme of education and training of small volume. It is designed to be capable of being integrated with other modules into larger programmes. A module can be shared by different programmes. Some modules are designed to lead to minor or special-purpose awards. In describing the educational formation provided by an independent module, it is sufficient to specify

a. the learning outcome and
b. the assumed (i.e. minimum) prior learning (prerequisite learning). Assumed prior learning is sometimes specified by listing prerequisite modules.

Certain parameters are often used in the description of a module. These include an indication of the stage in the programme at which the module is offered and sometimes, where feasible, the module's NFQ level (i.e., the level of the MIMLOs on the NFQ where the module is designed to lead to a minor award) and of the average (entry qualified) learner effort required to complete the module successfully (represented using ECTS). Note that it is not always feasible (or even meaningful) to assign an NFQ level to a module particularly for lower volume modules at higher levels in the NFQ.

To validate a programme, all modules must be considered together. Piecemeal validation (in isolation) of constituent modules within a larger programme cannot validate the larger programme. This is because the piecemeal process is blind to the joint effect of the modules, as well as to the 'integration of learning and teaching' that may be required. Note, also, that learning acquired through a sequence of modules depends on the order of the sequence.

(11) Blended Learning

QQI adopted a Garrison and Kanuka (2004) definition of blended learning, which defines it as 'the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences'. Hibernia College complements this broad definition by an understanding that blended learning should be characterised as falling along a continuum as proposed by Jones (2006). Such a conception can accommodate a range of blended learning approaches.

(12) Fully Online Learning

'Fully Online Learning' is here defined by QQI a programme where teaching, learning and assessment occur online, either synchronously, asynchronously, or in combination and where no onsite instruction is required

(13) Programme Board

A dedicated committee established with overall responsibility for that programme, including the programme assessment strategy

(14) Types of Provision

   a. Articulation Arrangement
   b. Collaborative Provision
   c. Franchising
   d. Transnational Provision

(15) Programme Development Due Diligence

Undertaking enquiries about a proposed programme's regulatory context and viability, particularly in the context of a prospective collaborative and/or transnational arrangement to inform a decision whether to proceed or not.

(16) Validation

The process by which it is confirmed that a programme of higher education will enable a registered learner who completes that programme to acquire and where appropriate be able to demonstrate the necessary knowledge, skill or competence to justify the award being made in respect of that programme in line with the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012](#).

Section 2 - Context

Legal or Regulatory Context

Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012

(17) This policy is cognisant of the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012](#) and its definitions and provisions around the principles underpinning the validation of programmes of education leading to awards on the Irish [National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)](#).

Quality Assurance Guidelines

(18) This policy has been designed with regard to the [European Standards and Guidelines](#) and QQI [Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines](#), [Sector Specific Independent/Private Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines](#), all of which specify and guide on the need for Hibernia College to implement policy and procedure to support the design and approval of programmes.
In the [Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines](#), guidelines for programme development and approval (3.1), as well as programme monitoring and review (3.3), are clearly laid out and should be considered when developing and providing programmes of education and training regardless of the mode of delivery. The [Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines](#) also include guidelines on staff recruitment (4.1) and staff development (4.3).

Validation Policies and Criteria

(19) Where a programme is being developed for submission to QQI for accreditation as a programme leading to an award on the [National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)](#), it is developed in line with QQI's [Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training](#).

Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Blended and Fully Online Learning Programmes

(20) The [Topic-Specific Statutory QA Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes](#) are a supplement to the QQI [Core Statutory QA Guidelines](#) and [Sector-Specific QA Guidelines](#). As a provider delivering

blended learning programmes, Hibernia College shall 'have regard to' the [Core QA Guidelines](#), the [Sector-Specific guidelines](#) and the [Topic-Specific Guidelines for Blended Learning](#).

Transnational and Collaborative Provision

(21) Where the programme being developed is intended to be delivered as a collaborative or transnational provision, the development and approval takes place in line with:

    a. The College [Framework on Collaborative and Transnational Provision](#)

    b. The College [Framework for International Student Support](#)

    c. QQI [policies for transnational and collaborative provision](#) in addition to the usual regulatory requirements for new programmes

    d. IHEQN [Guidelines for the Approval, Monitoring and Review of Collaborative and Transnational Provision](#)

International Good Practice and Standards

(22) The College shall have due regard to the following policy instruments as relevant to a particular programme.

    a. [European Standards and Guidelines](#)

    b. [ACODE - Benchmarks for Technology Enhanced Learning](#)

        i. The Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-learning, referred to as ACODE, developed benchmarks in 2014 for technology enhanced learning and teaching. This policy, and associated procedures, have been designed to, at a minimum, meet these benchmarks.

    c. EADTU - [Quality Assessment for E-learning: a Benchmarking Approach](#)

        i. The European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), a leading European institutional association in online, open and flexible higher education, has also established benchmarks for good practice. This policy, and associated procedures, has also been designed to, at a minimum, meet these benchmarks.

    d. [Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher education in the European region, Lisbon (1997)](#)

    e. [Committee of the Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, Recommendation the Recognition of Joint Degrees, Strasbourg (2004)](#)

    f. OECD/UNESCO [Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education (2005)](#)

    g. UNESCO/Council of Europe [Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education (2007)](#)

    h. BFUG, [European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, 2014](#)

    i. [UNESCO-Asia Pacific Quality Network Toolkit: Regulating the quality of cross-border education (2006)](#)

    j. Ministers of Education, European Higher Education Area - [European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes 2015](#)

        i. A policy around the European accreditation approach for joint programmes, which should be applied to

Section 3 - Policy Statements

Part A - Principles for Design of Programmes for a Fully Online or Blended Learning Environment

The learner experience is at the heart of the design process.

(23) Fully online and blended modes of learning are a novel experience for most learners. Learners studying in these modes do not have access to the tacit, taken-for-granted supports available to those studying on campus – the familiarity bred from meeting almost daily with classmates, supported by a teacher/lecturer who is physically present for those periods. When designing for blended and online learning, Hibernia College creates alternative support systems and learning environments for its learners underpinned by the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2001) and its focus on social, teaching and cognitive presence. [See The Pedagogical Basis of Blended Programme Design for further details].

The College communicates clearly to learners with regard to the purpose, structure and expectations associated with blended or fully online learning, thus ensuring that all learners are equipped with a capacity to succeed statement that is both programme and context specific. This includes educating them on the role that technology plays in their learning and how that will impact their study strategies, communicating clear expectations in relation to their engagement with and participation in online learning activities and providing them with robust technical and academic support, as detailed within the Framework for International Student Support. It also seeks to design programmes that actively engage learners with each other and with their learning - enabling a collaborative and participatory experience.

Designs are research based and aligned to the Teaching Learning and Assessment Strategy for online and blended learning.

(24) Hibernia College's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy sets out the framework that underpins the choice of instructional strategies and guides pedagogical decision-making. Its goal is to ensure that our learners receive an excellent, research-informed teaching and learning experience. The design and development of the online learning environment and its constituent learning activities is informed by the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy as well as relevant theories and models in online learning, such as:

   a. Active learning
   b. Cognitivism
   c. Cognitive theory of multimedia learning (Mayer and Moreno, 2003)
   d. Community of Inquiry
   e. Social Constructivism
   f. Reflective learning

Designs seek to closely integrate online and face-to-face elements.

(25) In designing blended learning programmes, care is taken to ensure tight integration between online and in person components. At the curriculum planning stage, programmes are mapped out in terms of their online and in person components, giving careful consideration to the affordances of each environment. Learning materials and activities in both the online learning environment and in person sessions are connected and referenced in each mode of delivery. In person sessions are linked to online sessions through the design of activities that span both modes.

(26) In designing fully online learning programmes, care is taken to ensure that programmes aims can be delivered in a fully online environment. At the curriculum planning stage, programmes and their individual elements are designed and planned to sure a wide breath of full range of online learning modalities are included. Learning materials and activities are considered to ensure that programme learning outcomes are achieved and College approach to academic standards are maintained.

Designs aim to maximise flexibility and accessibility for learners.

(27) Hibernia College's mission centres on making education accessible to learners through reducing restrictions imposed by time and location. In designing our programmes, we endeavour to use technology, where appropriate, to design learning experiences that learners can engage with at a time and location that suits them. In designing content for online delivery, we are conscious of the need to adhere to the principles of universal design to ensure that content is available in a range of formats to provide choice and flexibility for all learners, including those who may have specific learning difficulties. We are also aware of, and responsive to, the support needs of all learners irrespective of their location and implement support structures that are inclusive of all learners fostering an environment where all learners can achieve their full learning potential.

Part B - Principles for Developing Online Materials

(28) Subject Matter Experts and Learning Designers work together to develop online materials.

The process is collaborative.

(29) In Hibernia College, the development of materials for blended and fully online programmes is a collaborative, team-based process that values the expertise and inputs from team members across a range of college functions. The College recognises that delivery of education programmes through digital media changes the traditional relationship between teacher/lecturer and learner and necessitates the development of new approaches and support structures. The planning process thus draws on and incorporates inputs from the relevant Programme Team, student support teams and the Digital Learning Department (DLD), all within the context of the virtual learning enviornment (VLE). This collaboration is all underpinned and supported by the work of the Department of the Registrar in ensuring that the College adheres to all the relevant QA guidelines and frameworks.

The process is highly structured.

(30) The development of materials for delivery in an online education programme is a complex and multi-faceted activity that requires input from a wide range of pedagogical, technical and content specialists. Materials intended for online learning must be cohesive, engaging, and effective. To ensure that all development is of the highest possible quality, Hibernia College has created a highly structured approach to the planning, development and review of the online materials. The process is designed to ensure the capture and sharing of all information that is critical to the development of an effective blended or fully online programme through the use of templates, standardised procedures and extensive documentation that provides guidance to all personnel involved in the programme development process. Development projects are managed in line with standard project management methodologies.

The process is adaptive.

(31) Designing programmes for technology-mediated environments must be a dynamic process that continually evolves as new technologies emerge, bringing with them new affordances for teaching and learning. The DLD has a remit to ensure that staff members keep up to date with emergent technologies and new pedagogical approaches through continuous professional development, attendance and participation at conferences and other showcase events, following relevant social media feeds, and engaging in professional networks. Exploration, discussion and evaluation of new tools and technologies is a standing item at DLD meetings. The Head of Digital Learning reports periodically to the EMT, the Academic Board and academic teams on new technologies that the College is considering

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deploying and the Learning Technologist works closely with the Programme Teams to explore how they can be used within the College, engaging with learners where user acceptance testing is required.

Status and Details

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Glossary Terms and Definitions

"Articulation Arrangement" - A process whereby students who satisfy academic criteria on one programme are automatically entitled (on academic grounds) to be admitted to an advanced stage of a different programme of study leading to an award

"Blended Learning" - QQI adopted a Garrison and Kanuka (2004) definition of blended learning, which defines it as 'the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences'. Hibernia College complements this broad definition by an understanding that blended learning should be characterised as falling along a continuum as proposed by Jones (2006). Such a conception can accommodate a range of blended learning approaches.

"Collaborative Provision" - This refers to two or more providers being involved by formal agreement in the provision of a programme of higher education and training.

"Curriculum and Pedagogy" - An article of Michael Young's in 2014 discussed the concepts of curriculum and pedagogy. This extract has been used to present a way of thinking about curriculum and pedagogy when designing a programme: '...in designing curricula...an analytical distinction between the two concepts... [curriculum/pedagogy dichotomy] may be useful. ...[T]he concept "curriculum" refers to the knowledge that it is hoped [learners] will acquire by the end of a course. In contrast, pedagogy refers to the activities that teachers devise for their [learners] to enable them to acquire the knowledge specified by the curriculum.' (Michael Young (2014) What is a curriculum and what can it do?, The Curriculum Journal, 25(1), pp.7-13. DOI: 10.1080/09585176.2014.902526?)

"Franchising" - The process by which a degree-awarding institution agrees to authorise another organisation to deliver (and sometimes assess) part or all of one or more of its own approved programmes

"Online Learning" - Online Learning refers to a type of programme where all teaching occurs entirely online, either synchronously or asynchronously, or in combination. Learners can complete their programme of study from a distance with no in-person or on-site requirements.

"Policy" - Policies are principled statements adopted by the College at a high level to enable decisions about actions and desired outcomes to which the College is committed. They clearly articulate the formal position of the College on specific issues in order to guide internal decision-making. Policies set out 'what to do' on a given issue. They have a medium- to long-term review cycle.

"Procedure" - Procedures are the broad actions that must be carried out to implement a policy. They set out 'how to do' what the policy specifies must be done.

"Programme" - A programme of education and training refers to any process by which learners may acquire knowledge, skill or competence. It includes courses of study or instruction, apprenticeships, training and employment. A programme offers learners the learning opportunities by which they may attain educational goals (expressed as the intended programme learning outcome) by learning activities in a learning environment. A programme is normally comprised of modules. A programme leading to a major award will normally require a 'cohesion generating' process which integrates constituent modules so that the minimum intended programme learning outcomes are supported. The cohesion generating process should establish the epistemological and cultural identity of the programme. It should also coordinate alignment of activities with the minimum intended programme learning outcomes and introduce learners to the broader community of practice to which they aspire. (QQI (2013) Assessment and Standards Revised)

"Programme Board" - A dedicated committee established with overall responsibility for that programme, including the programme assessment strategy

"Transnational Provision" - The provision or partial provision of a programme of education in one country by a provider that is based in another country (In the absence of State policy relating to the provision of blended learning and online learning, Hibernia College also applies the term transnational provision to accessing from one country a programme of education offered by a provider based in another country.)

"Validation" - The process by which it is confirmed that a programme of higher education will enable a registered learner who completes that programme to acquire and where appropriate be able to demonstrate the necessary knowledge, skill or competence to justify the award being made in respect of that programme in line with the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012.

"Fully Online Learning" - Fully online learning is here defined by QQI as a programme where teaching, learning and assessment occur online, either synchronously, asynchronously, or in combination and where no onsite instruction is required.