

INTERIM BLUEPRINT FOR A BLENDED UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

April 22nd 2022

Introduction

Changes in programme delivery, made necessary by the COVID 19 pandemic, have accelerated the acquisition of staff and students' skills and experience related to digital learning across the university. This presents an opportunity to enhance learning, and we undoubtedly will not return to the same model of delivery and student experience we had previously. However, it is also clear that provision undertaken in an emergency context should not define our approach in the future. Developments in this regard will form part of our next teaching and learning strategy, in the context of operating principles for the university, and it will take time to reach a final position.

Education Committee has discussed the future impact of the switch from traditional face-to-face delivery to online and blended learning during the pandemic over recent months. DCU is predominantly a campus-based institution with a commitment to leverage the affordances of technology to enhance the education of all our students, and we are evolving our strategy in this regard.

- In the first instance, changes to online or strongly blended modes of delivery for some part-time postgraduate programmes will be considered by Education Committee, with an emphasis on enhancing flexibility of offerings. Education Committee approved the [Principles for Quality Assurance of DCU E-learning and Blended Provision](#) at its meeting of 8 December 2021¹, and a [process to seek approval for a change in delivery mode](#) has been put in place.
- We continue to develop new online offerings under our strategic partnership with Futurelearn and/or as part of building up our micro credential portfolio.
- It is recognised that the context is very different at undergraduate level, where our commitment to students is to a campus based programme (other than for DCU Connected programmes), and our primary focus is on enhancing campus based learning through appropriate use of blended learning. This paper clarifies an interim position for '22/23 in respect to undergraduate programmes. The baseline when considering changes is the delivery model of undergraduate programmes prior to the pandemic.

¹ Definitions: DCU adopts European definitions. ENQA defines **online delivery** as a study mode where students can predominately complete an individual course or their programme of study without the need for any on-campus instruction. The course is usually delivered through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction with all learning conducted at a distance. **Blended delivery** refers to a study mode where courses are intentionally designed to combine both online and face-to-face teaching in any combination. While sometimes known as hybrid learning, the common intention is to provide students with greater flexibility through some provision of online learning but where teaching also takes place on a physical campus.

DCU experience of blended learning

In-person (also known as face-to-face) is the traditional view of how undergraduate modules are typically delivered in DCU². However, it is important to also acknowledge that even this traditional mode typically involves student self-directed learning using Loop as the online engagement default. In this sense, well before the COVID-19 pandemic, DCU was known as a leader and early adopter of blended learning and this was acknowledged in the [findings of the Expert Panel](#) in the University's 2020 Thematic Quality Review of Digital Learning. While the concept of blended learning is not new at DCU the quality review also established that a stronger programmatic approach is required to better harness the active, engaging and more flexible affordances of blended delivery.

Blended delivery falls along a continuum, and the descriptors in Table 1 capture levels along this continuum. Before the pandemic, the level of blending at DCU fell into the categories of relatively weak or moderate in terms of fundamental enhancements to the student learning experience. While Loop is a well-established feature of DCU's teaching and learning environment, there are few examples of stronger level of blending, where technology is redefining or transforming the nature of teaching, learning and assessment.

Table 1. The blended delivery continuum

| Level of Blending | Extent of Enhancement | Blended Experience |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Weak blending | Technology acts as a substitute for conventional delivery, with minimal enhancements to the student learning experience | Access to a repository of digital course material in Loop and some self-directed online learning activities but with weak wrapping between online and face-to-face delivery. |
| Moderate blending | Technology augments or helps to modify conventional delivery, with valuable but largely incremental enhancements to the student learning experience. | Access to a repository of more interactive digital resources, including polls, quizzes and videos, and some teacher facilitated asynchronous online learning activities with moderate wrapping between online and face-to-face delivery |
| Stronger blending | Technology is fully infused and helps to redefine conventional delivery, with the creation of more active, flexible and previously inconceivable student learning experiences. | Access to a well-designed library of interactive digital resources, including polls, quizzes and videos, and other tools. Purposefully selected synchronous and asynchronous teacher facilitated online learning activities engage students in active learning and help to redesign traditional classes with strong wrapping between online and face-to-face delivery |

² with the exception of DCU Connected undergraduate programmes

The roll-out of DCU Futures is laying the groundwork for a stronger model of blended delivery of undergraduate programmes in DCU. Ongoing review of the pilot and emerging lessons will be a key factor in decisions to be made regarding future changes to undergraduate delivery. The DCU Futures model is piloting some blending of campus and online elements by design. In the initial stages of the roll-out of DCU Futures, a number of observations have been made, outlined below.

The DCU Futures experience of blended learning

The selected mode of delivery in DCU Futures is an extrapolation of the current default where specific modules have a significantly greater fraction of online learning elements, and are designed as such, so that they move to Strong (deep) blending. In DCU Futures, these modules are defined by two characteristics - that their traditional on campus footprint is reduced by at least 50%, and that they are redesigned to ensure an active and engaging online learning experience that includes peer-to-peer interaction, staff to student interaction, and student support. It is important to note that such activities are limited to ⅓ of the overall programme, i.e. 10 credits worth of learning online within a 60 credit academic sitting.

Eight DCU Futures programmes were rolled out in the 2021-2022 academic year, all incorporating elements of strongly blended delivery. Based on feedback from Futures programme chairs, student representatives, DCU Studio and the TEU for this first iteration across first year of all programmes and second year of one programme, four aspects have emerged to date:

- It is critical that modules with a significantly greater fraction of online learning elements are considered within the programme as a whole from the perspective of the student learning experience. Experience shows that patterns of delivery (and assessment) for modules impact on each other in terms of student engagement and effort, and mapping of the students' experience in totality is important.
- Active learning in an online environment, that is enabled by an interactive and engaging course design, is crucial for modules that incorporate a significant online learning component. This has been best served by a model where a maximum of 50% of the traditional campus attendance is retained for a given module that is redesigned for stronger blending. At lower percentages of online activity, modules tended to retain the traditional face-to-face module design, with online components skewed towards extra reading/passive transmission elements, rather than redesigned, learning enhancing approaches.
- For modules with a strongly blended learning component, a strong teacher presence is crucial. Effective learning requires scheduled, regular and meaningful communication with academic staff.
- Effective module design should be informed by sound pedagogy and assessment, that is, modules should be (re)designed using a pedagogy-led approach. Good online learning cannot simply be substituted for a campus model and must be redesigned to ensure peer-to-peer interaction, staff to student interaction, and student support.

As we move to year two of DCU Futures implementation, experience and evidence will grow and it is expected that the position regarding undergraduate delivery will evolve. Internationally, institutions are grappling with the best model and we will also leverage insight gained elsewhere as we develop the next strategy for Teaching and Learning.

Implications for stronger blending in 22/23

In the context described above, it is also recognised that colleagues across DCU are reflecting on experience with different modes of delivery over the last two years and planning teaching of campus-based undergraduate modules and programmes for 22/23. It is understood that, as a baseline, DCU

student learning is supported via the use of Loop as a repository of notes/ assessment exemplars/ links to supporting resources/ to facilitate submission of assignments etc. The following relates to enhancing the level of blended learning in new ways by replacing some traditional campus delivery (lectures/workshops/labs etc) in redesigned modules leveraging affordances of technology. There is no expectation that every programme introduces stronger level blending, and the default is campus delivery of undergraduate programmes supported by Loop. Where there is an ambition to change, the following applies:

The rationale for change in an undergraduate module delivery to strongly blended or fully online must first have the support of the module co-ordinator's line manager/Head of School and the Programme Chair (where programmes are owned across schools). The Head of School has a specific role in relation to workload or working arrangements implications.

A change is also subject to the following guidance regarding blending which applies to programme and module levels:

- Programme Chairs are responsible for maintaining an overview of the student learning experience
 - online delivery should account for no more than 1/6 of any academic structure. The undergraduate experience should remain a campus based one, enhanced by blending.
 - a greater level of blending than existed pre-pandemic could be achieved by one module in 6 being fully online, or via two modules, where the traditional on-campus footprint is reduced by 50% in each and learning enhanced by online elements.
 - to maintain the intended balance in learning experience, substitution of campus activities such as lectures by online alternatives is not permitted in other modules in a programme.
 - modules to be (re)designed for online or blended delivery should be agreed with the programme chair and, where possible with the programme board.
- Module (re)designs should align with the recently approved [quality standards for online and blended delivery](#), and incorporate the following aspects in the design process, with details captured in the module change documents:
 - pedagogy-led design,
 - active learning components,
 - scheduled and regular teacher presence.
- The usual process with regard to approving changes to modules at faculty level should be followed for modules (re)designed for blended delivery;

Consultation with the Teaching Enhancement Unit in the first instance can assist colleagues embarking on module redesign.

Faculties will report to Education Committee on the degree to which it is proposed to make changes for 22/23 and student and staff experience, together with the strategic position of the university will feed into further discussion and developments.