Principles for Quality Assurance of DCU E-learning & Blended Provision

Approved by Education Committee 8 December 2021

Context

DCU's quality assurance framework and processes for academic offerings are anchored in [European Standards and Guidelines (ESG 2015)](#)[1] which state:

> *The ESG apply to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery…* (ESG, 2015, p.9)

DCU, in common with higher education institutions across the globe, saw a rapid pivot to online and blended learning delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This pivot has created new challenges, and new opportunities, while also foregrounding the critical importance of maintaining, ensuring and enhancing QA standards:

> *"…the role of quality assurance in ensuring that quality standards are maintained and supporting the university community in their work, while providing assurance to the public of the status of quality in higher education, has become paramount[2]."* - Cirlan and Loukkola (2021: 4).

DCU is committed to ensuring a student and learning-centred approach in all aspects of educational provision, and the fundamental premise underpinning the principles outlined below is that the student learning experience in online and blended modalities should be of the same high quality as those in face-to-face teaching contexts. The ESG are intended to form a broad basis for conceptualising quality, with the following four anchors (ESG, 2015: 7):

- Establishment of a common framework,
- Enable assurance and improvement of quality,
- Support mutual trust,
- Provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA.

Each of these principles has implications for blended and online learning QA approaches at DCU.

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) publication, *[Considerations for Quality Assurance of E-learning Provision](#)[3]*, provides guidance on how ESG 2015 can be made applicable to e-learning, providing varying indicators regarding internal quality assurance frameworks, with the following as examples (summarised, p.7):

- That e-learning is part of the overall strategy, and policy for QA,
- There is a clearly articulated policy framework and governance structure,
- Policies, structures, processes and resources are in place,
- Codes and policies of practice ensuring integrity and ethical behaviour,
- Security measures,
- Written agreements with external parties,
- Stakeholders are involved in internal QA processes (students, in particular).

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[1] *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium.

[2] Cirlan, E., and Loukkola, T. (2021). *Internal quality assurance in times of COVID-19*. Research Report, European University Association (EUA).

[3] Heurtas, E., Biscan, I., Ejsing, C., Kerber, L., Kozlowska, L., Ortega, S., Lauri, L., Risse, M., Schorg, K, and Seppman, G (on behalf on ENQA). (2018). *Considerations for Quality Assurance of E Learning Provision*. Occasional Papers, No. 26.

Principles

Drawing on this ENQA guidance, the following principles relating to internal quality assurance for blended and online delivery are adopted, collated under the thematic categories (drawn from ESG 2015) of *learning design*, *scaffolded interaction*, and *evidence-based continuous improvement.*

Learning Design

Each recommendation regarding learning design is linked to the development and demonstration of **pedagogical content knowledge** and its application**, namely, *"knowledge of principles needed to design for, and facilitate, meaningful online learning experiences"* (Rapanta et al., 2020: 924)[4]. This is defined broadly since granular implementation will vary significantly by discipline, domain, and content level. The following five principles should be cornerstones of a DCU approach.

1. **Defined standards (ENQA, 2018: p.8):** Teaching and design staff should articulate and document learning outcomes, assessment practices, and justification for teaching and learning within learning objects and environments. This transparency should be visible in all elements of course design, and well-communicated to students. If a course is blended, encompassing both face-to-face and online learning, the specific function of both elements should be independently emphasised. An overarching consideration in course design should be Universal Design for Learning.

2. **Designing for presence (ENQA, 2018: p.9):** Where courses are delivered in hybrid, blended, or online modalities, teacher/academic presence and its form should be made explicit to students throughout teaching and learning. Examples of synchronous presence, such as facilitating live opportunities for discussion, should be complemented where possible with appropriate asynchronous presence, such as responses to student queries, and email correspondence. Teaching/academic/professional support staff should design for multimodal forms of presence, where possible.

3. **Designing for flexibility (ENQA, 2018: p.5):** Students face changed learning environments, and approaches for flexible learning should also be incorporated, while emphasising the critical importance of synchronous attendance. Examples of processes for flexibility include providing recordings of lectures, utilising LOOP and other institutional pages as a nexus of learning materials, and promoting a culture of engagement.

4. **Appropriate blended and online technology use:** Teaching/academic/professional support staff should be aware of the significant training and development offered by DCU units, i.e., TEU and DCU Studio, and understand preferred uses of technology and application of same within learning environments. This includes when and how synchronous online platforms should be utilised, as well as the additive potential for interactivity through particular learning objects.

5. **Alignment and coherence (ENQA, 2018: p.8-9):** In keeping with principles of appropriate use, modules should see a close alignment between the types of technology utilised, forms of assessment, and design choices; those design choices will be moderated by the particular student cohort being addressed and the academic discipline. The chosen design and technology should be foregrounded in learning outcomes and course pages, rather than included in a *post-hoc*

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[4]Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P., Guardia, L., Koole, M., "Online University Teaching During and After the Covid-19 Crisis: Refocusing Teacher Presence and Learning Activity", *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2, 923–945 (2020)

manner, i.e., it should be explicit how the chosen learning technology will support virtual, augmented, collaborative and interactive learning.

Scaffolded interaction

The role of the teacher/academic in blended and online learning environments cannot be overstated, and DCU recognises that there can be challenges for staff in designing and delivering blended learning. In many instances, the role of an academic/facilitator/teacher should be as an effective support and content expert, while *"encouraging students to take an active role in creating the learning process."* (ESG, 2015: 12). This active role entails co-construction, and designing for social interaction, in a blended or online format.

1. **Scaffolding appropriate blended technology use (ENQA, 2018: p.10):** Internal QA processes should be designed on the assumption that students may not have experience with, or awareness of, many resources they will encounter in e-learning/blended learning contexts. Sufficient documentation and support should be provided within courses to enable students to match best practices in learning technology use.

2. **Facilitating independent and inter-student engagement (ENQA, 2018: p.9):** As adult learners, students are primarily responsible for, and will likely independently develop, informal student networks and communication. However, students may also "need encouragement to engage online with each other" (Huertas et al., 2018: 9), and learning design should therefore raise this possibility, while incorporating both the benefits, and cautions that students should consider (e.g. privacy, sharing data).

3. **Supporting digital best practices (ENQA, 2018: p.10):** Digital best practices incorporate literacy for e-assessment and interaction, including appropriate awareness of issues regarding plagiarism, integrity, and online behaviour. Teaching and learning approaches should emphasise these principles, providing for ethical awareness and integrity.

Evidence-based continuous improvement

A core premise of DCU's internal QA approach is one of continuous improvement, in which an evidence-based approach is adopted to measure both design and impacts of learning offerings.

1. **Learning materials are tailored and updated regularly (ENQA, 2018: p.10):** A key principle incorporated within QA processes for elearning is one of continuous improvement and updating. Resources should be reviewed and updated regularly, to maintain relevance and to ensure that technology-enhanced processes remain functional, and to ensure that DCU offerings are aligned with DCU QA review processes.

2. **DCU QA Processes are embedded in design processes:** While each module and course exists independently, it is expected that all courses align with strategic and institutional objectives. Institution-level design criteria and processes, such as the expertise of the DCU Studio, and Teaching Enhancement Unit (TEU), should be consulted and considered in new course design, and in ensuring curricular and institutional alignment.

3. **A culture and cycle of 'continuous improvement' is applied internally (ENQA, 2018: p.7):** DCU is committed to a "cycle of continuous improvement" (ENQA, 2018: 7), which entails a commitment to rigorous standards, and cyclical updating and assessment of institutional offerings (ESG, 2015: 15). Blended and online learning delivery are therefore viewed as iterative processes, capable of improvement and analysis.

4. **Student feedback is collated, documented and where appropriate, actioned (ENQA, 2018: 15):** As a broader issue, it is critical to document and include the student perspective, in particular experiences, so as to generate actionable evidence of impact, and areas for improvement. Student feedback should be triangulated with other data, and with stakeholders to inform continuous improvement.

Summary

ESG 2015 make a distinction between Internal QA (which is the responsibility of the provider) and External QA (which is the responsibility of an outside agency, in this case, QQI). External QA processes form the basis upon which these internal guidelines and criteria are written. These proposed principles are devised as a starting point for course designers, academic/teaching staff, professional support staff, and administrators, to comprehend the ground rules that underpin a DCU internal QA approach to blended and online learning. The adoption of these internal QA criteria for blended and online learning at DCU is intended to ensure:

> *"...a learning environment in which the content of programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpos*e" (ESG, 2015, p.9).