



Blended and Online Learning Policy

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GMIT Blended and Online Learning Policy

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GMIT Blended and Online Learning Policy

1. Introduction

This document specifies Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology's (GMIT) policy for the delivery of programmes leading to an award or to specified credits towards an award of the Institute, delivered, supported or assessed through means which may not require the student to attend on campus. This policy is intended to support GMIT in developing flexible learning opportunities and providing access to higher education. It will also guide GMIT in managing the potential risks posed by challenges and complexities in the arrangements for blended and online learning programmes and to safeguard academic standards.

The objectives of this policy are:

- 1.1. To provide a framework for staff to engage with blended and online learning programme delivery;
- 1.2. To ensure compliance with GMIT Quality Assurance Codes in approval, delivery and monitoring of blended and online learning programme delivery;
- 1.3. To ensure that the learning environment has the necessary operational supports for blended and online learning programme delivery;
- 1.4. To ensure that the technical infrastructure is available for blended and online learning delivery;
- 1.5. To ensure that staff are provided with the necessary training and support for blended and online learning programme delivery according to the relevant academic standard for programmes and awards;
- 1.6. To provide guidance on instructional design for blended and online learning programme delivery;
- 1.7. To ensure the legal responsibilities of the Institute have been met for blended and online learning programme delivery.

2. Definitions

A detailed glossary of terms is included in Appendix 1. The use of key terms are defined as follows in relation to this policy:

Blended Learning

"The integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" (Garrison and Kanuak, 2004, p96). This definition has been adopted by QQI (2018, p3) in the *Statutory Quality Assurance guidelines for blended learning*.

Online Learning

"A form of educational delivery in which learning takes place primarily via the Internet. Online learning can serve those who are geographically distant and without access to traditional classroom education, so it includes 'distance learning'. However, distance learners are not alone in benefiting from online learning, which is also commonly part of e-learning in mainly campus-based study programmes. In such cases, it may be referred to as blended learning" (Gaebel *et al.*, 2014, p17).

3. Overview

3.1. Scope

This policy covers all programmes of Higher Education and Training leading to awards by GMIT. It covers teaching, learning and assessment of programmes with a blended or online mode of delivery. It is designed to safeguard academic standards and ensure support for staff and students engaged in blended and online learning programme provision.

3.2 Legal and Policy Context

GMIT complies with the requirements of Ireland’s national legislation, agreements and regulations, including with Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. The 2012 Act requires providers to have due regard to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Quality Assurance guidelines in the development of the Institute’s QA procedures and in the development of programmes of education and training.

The Institute’s policy on blended and online learning provision is consistent with QQI standards, guidelines, policies and criteria relating to programmes and awards. In particular, it applies the guidelines provided in QQI’s *Statutory Quality Assurance guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes (2018)*. This QQI guideline notes that as blended learning will always include a face-to-face element, it does not cover programmes where learning is fully online. The QQI guideline includes guidance on “Online learning resources developed for online delivery” (QQI, 2018, p3) and should also be read in conjunction with QQI’s policy on QA (core) Guidelines” (QQI, 2018, p3).

Since the publication of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, the *National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning* has been established by the HEA and a series of reports have been published with the aim of developing a cutting edge digital learning environment in all higher education institutes in Ireland. There are many comprehensive studies documenting and debating the changes required by higher education institutes, in order, to be successful in the digital learning environment.

The following documents provide guidance to Higher Education Institutes in the development of their online education provision and has informed this policy development:

- 3.2.1. Guide to Developing Enabling Policies for Digital Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (Murphy, 2018)
- 3.2.2. Teaching and Learning in Irish Education: A Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015-2017 (National Forum, 2015a)
- 3.2.3. Ireland’s Higher Education Technical Infrastructure: A review of current context, with implications for teaching and learning enhancement (National Forum, 2017a)
- 3.2.4. Using Learning Analytics to Support the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (National Forum, 2017b)
- 3.2.5. National Professional Development Framework for All Staff Who Teach in Higher Education (National Forum, 2016b)
- 3.2.6. Understanding and Supporting the Role of Learning Technologists in Irish Higher Education (National Forum, 2016a)
- 3.2.7. Technology Enhanced Learning Survey (UCC, 2014)
- 3.2.8. Learning Resources and Open Access in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland (National Forum, 2015b).

3.3 Strategic context

The Institute's mission as stated in its Strategic Plan 2013-2016 is:

"At GMIT we develop life-long learning opportunities through our teaching and research, by supporting regional development consistent with national higher education policy" (GMIT, 2013, p4).

In accordance with QQI (2018), Guideline 3. 1, the institute's approved and published strategy should take account of the existing and planned development of blended and online learning provision. This policy is developed in the context of the Institute's published strategy and strategic choices in meeting the performance objectives as outlined in the Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-2020.

4. Principles

The development of blended and online learning provision is established within the context of the Institute approved Strategic Plan and specifically guided by the values as stated in the Institute Strategic Plan 2013-2016:

Higher Education for the benefits it brings to society and the individual; Equity in support of social cohesion; The role of education as a catalyst for change; Participating in regional development

The following assumptions underpin the development and implementation of this policy;

- 4.1. In accordance with QQI guideline (2018), section 3.1.3, the Institute will ensure that all strategies and processes for the appointment, induction, training, professional development and appraisal arrangements for teaching and support staff are appropriate and specific to a blended or online learning environment.
- 4.2. The Institute recognises that teaching on a blended and/or online learning programme requires pedagogical and technological expertise. The Institute will ensure that academic staff are provided with the necessary staff development and support systems to function effectively in the delivery of blended and online learning programme provision. The Institute will ensure that the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy Implementation Plan and Policy No 5.1 Continuous Professional Development takes account of pedagogical and technological upskilling needs.
- 4.3. The Institute recognises that benchmarks and indicators (e.g. contact hours) designed for face-to-face provision are not always fit-for-purpose in a blended and/or online learning environment and need to be revised as appropriate "given the flexibility afforded by digital technologies" (Murphy, 2018, p16).
- 4.4. The Institute will create and maintain a technology enhanced learning and teaching plan for the delivery of blended and online learning. The Institute will ensure that it will provide the appropriate technical infrastructure and technical support for programmes with a blended and/or online learning delivery mode.
- 4.5. The Institute is responsible for compliance with legal and statutory obligations - to include but not limited - Child Protection legislation; Data Protection legislation including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR); applicable professional body requirements and local regulatory considerations in transnational provision.
- 4.6. The Institute will ensure compliance with any Intellectual Property and Copyright legal obligations appropriate to a blended and online learning context.
- 4.7. The Institute will ensure that any arrangements for collaboration or partnership in the development, delivery, assessment or evaluation of blended and online learning provision are approved by the Institute and subject to appropriate and clear formal agreements.
- 4.8. The Institute has a statutory responsibility to ensure its teaching, learning and assessment practices are accessible to students with disabilities. It provides educational opportunity to a diverse range of students and recognizes that situational impairments, activity limitations and restrictions on participation, as well as disability may cause exclusion.

5. Academic Standards

- 5.1. GMIT is responsible for the academic standards and quality assurance of programmes delivered through blended and online learning. All programmes offered under blended and online learning will be subject to the core quality processes that underpin all of GMIT's programmes, including validation, ongoing monitoring and periodic revalidation (see <http://www.gmit.ie/general/quality-assurance-framework>). It is the responsibility of the Institute to ensure the arrangements for the delivery of programmes and provision of support and assessment of students while ensuring that the academic standards of all awards are in accordance with Institute Academic standards as set by Institute Codes of Practice.
- 5.2. The Institute will ensure that procedures and regulations as specified in the Academic Code of Practice No. 2 Validation, Monitoring and Review are fit for purpose in a blended and online learning environment.
- 5.3. The Institute will ensure that procedures and regulations as specified in Academic Code of Practice No. 3 Student Assessment; Marks & Standards are fit for purpose in a blended and online learning environment. For example, the Institute will ensure that reliable and scalable systems and processes are in place to verify the identity of students, manage remote assessments and across different time zones.
- 5.4. The Institute will ensure that quality assurance systems to monitor and /or moderate standards are fit for purpose in a blended and online learning environment.
- 5.5. The Institute will ensure that processes and regulations as specified in Academic Code of Practice No. 4 Access, Transfer and Progression are fit for purpose in a blended and online learning environment.
- 5.6. The Institute will ensure that the student record system supports blended and online learning programmes and the quality assurance of a flexible learning experience.

6. Programme design and delivery

- 6.1 In accordance with QQI (2018) Guideline 4: Programme Context, the teaching, learning and assessment strategies and delivery mechanisms adopted in blended and online learning delivery, should be specifically designed for this context.
- 6.2 In accordance with QQI (2018) Guideline 4.1.1, the Institute will ensure that blended and online learning developments are learner centred and subject-led rather than technology led. The organisational structure and processes will ensure that technology is the service of pedagogy.
- 6.3 The Institute will ensure its teaching, learning, and assessment practices are accessible to all students through the implementation of a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework to improve and optimise teaching and learning for all.
- 6.4 In accordance with QQI Guideline 4.1 (2018); subject specific and educational scholarship informs the pedagogy and instructional design. The Institute recognises that contact hours may no longer be an appropriate indicator related to teaching. The programme design will specify the required effort for the activities of teaching, content creation and moderation in blended and online learning delivery.
- 6.5 The Institute will take all practicable steps to ensure security and reliability of its online learning and support systems in accordance with the Institute's Information Technology Security policy.
- 6.6 The Institute will control access to the Institute's online learning and support systems.
- 6.7 The Institute will take all practicable steps to ensure continuity of service delivery of its online learning and support systems as outlined in its Business Continuity Policy and Disaster Recovery. It will ensure that a contingency plan is available in the event of failure of the designated modes of delivery.

7. Student Information/Support

- 7.1 Prior to enrolment on a blended and/or online learning programme, students are provided with an e-Handbook on the programme. This should include but not be limited to – the nature and extent of autonomous learning, collaborative and supported aspects of learning; details of specified timings for synchronous learning or assessment, rules governing flexibility for learners, regulations in place to provide a unique student identity and protect student information.
- 7.2 The student programme e-Handbook will also specify requirements for access to the online learning environment – detailing the required broadband specification and any specific hardware or software requirements, for example.
- 7.3 The student programme e-Handbook will provide information on the level and nature of support available, including but not limited to academic, technical and pastoral support.
- 7.4 The Institute will ensure that procedures and regulations as specified in the Code of Student Conduct are fit for purpose in a blended and/or online learning environment.
- 7.5 The Institute will ensure that guidelines as specified in the Social Media Policy are fit for purpose in a blended and online learning environment.
- 7.6 The Institute will ensure that implementation strategies as articulated in the *Student Retention Policy* are fit for purpose in a blended and online learning environment.

8. Assessment of Students and Requirements

- 8.1 Assessments for blended and online learning programmes will be similar to those used for on-campus programmes with parity of standards being paramount. The Institute will ensure that the outcomes of assessment for a blended and/or online learning programme meets the specified academic level of the award as defined by the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).
- 8.2 Information on methods and criteria of assessment will be provided in the student programme e-Handbook.
- 8.3 Students will be made aware of the Institute guidance on avoiding plagiarism, which is provided in the regulations issued to all students and in the programme handbooks (see <https://www.gmit.ie/sites/default/files/public/general/docs/policy-plagiarism.pdf>)
- 8.4 Security issues relating to the authentication of a student's work need to be considered when designing assessment processes.

9. Staff Professional Development in Online Teaching and Learning

Educators need a set of digital competences specific to their profession in order to be able to seize the potential of digital technologies for enhancing and innovating education. The Institute will ensure that staff involved in teaching on a blended and/or online learning programme are appropriately qualified and supported. The Institute will ensure staff are provided with opportunities to develop their academic and technology enhanced learning skills and digital competences in accordance with *The European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators* (Redecker, 2017).

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Glossary of Terms

Blended Learning

“The integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (Garrison and Kanuak, 2004, p96). “Typically these are face-to-face programmes which incorporate remote online learning via a virtual learning environment” (QQI, 2018, p3).

E-Learning

“Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology” (QQI, 2016, p27).

“The term e-learning in the present survey is a generic expression for all learning involving the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to support both learning and teaching. Its meaning here, therefore, is normally synonymous with ICT-based learning. The term may refer to the use of various technologies and tools to support learning in different contexts, including face-to-face settings and distance learning, separately or in combination, in which case e-learning is usually called blended learning” (Gaebel *et al.*, 2014, p17).

“A form of teaching and learning - which may represent a part or the whole of the educational model in which it is used – that makes use of electronic media and devices to facilitate access, promote evolution and improve the quality of education and training” (Sangra *et al.*, 2011, p73).

Educational Technology

“The study and ethical practice related to the creation, use and management of appropriate technology for the design and delivery of education – including learning platforms, hardware, software and processes” (QQI, 2016, p27).

Flexible and Distributed Learning (FDL)

“A programme or module that offers a wholly at a distance, on-line, or blended learning experience, rather than requiring the learner only to attend classes or events at particular times and locations. Typically, it may not involve face-to-face contact between learners and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning ‘at a distance’” (QQI, 2016, p27).

Instructional Design

“The translation of pedagogical research into the design and testing of curriculum for FDL that is specifically centred on supporting the achievement of learning outcomes. Developing and implementing content (provided by academics) teaching and learning strategies and assessments for effective FDL delivery” (QQI, 2016, p28).

Learning Material

“The specific and/or specialist resources made available to learners through which the FDL course or programme is taught and learning opportunities are facilitated. Learning materials may be in any media such as hard copy, electronic, digital, audio or visual” (QQI, 2016, p28).

“The organisation that delivers FDL to learners and to whom fees are paid. In Ireland they may be an awarding body or another organisation that offers FDL on behalf of one or more awarding bodies” (QQI, 2016, p28).

Massive Open Online Courses

“An online course made freely available over the internet to potentially large numbers of learners at no charge. There are no entry criteria. MOOCs are not normally credit-bearing” (QQI, 2016, p27).

Online Learning

“A form of educational delivery in which learning takes place primarily via the Internet. Online learning can serve those who are geographically distant and without access to traditional classroom education, so it includes ‘distance learning’. However, distance learners are not alone in benefiting from online learning, which is also commonly part of e-learning in mainly campus-based study programmes. In such cases, it may be referred to as blended learning” (Gaebel *et al.*, 2014, p17).

VLE (Virtual Learning Environment)

“A site that hosts online resources and activities to support students’ learning” (Ally, 2009, 291).

Appendix 2: National reports and frameworks guiding GMIT's online and blended learning policy

1. Guide to Developing Enabling Policies for Digital Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (May 2018)

This National Forum report is a comprehensive guide for any higher education institute in Ireland seeking to enhance or develop their digital learning policies and is available online https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/TL_Briefing_EnablingPolicyGuide_WEB.pdf. The report focuses on five themes including:

Theme one: Curriculum Design

The report includes models for curricular design for digital teaching and learning. Including the concept of Universal Design which responds to the diverse needs of student's on-campus as well as those at a distance. Links between curricular design and digital literacy skills required of staff and students for effective high-quality learning experiences and the growing role of students as co-creators as well as consumers of curricula are addressed. Presents resources and practice case studies illustrating the cost/benefits of particular forms of curricular design, and an explanatory framework of relevant digital pedagogies.

Theme two: IPR and Copyright Issues for Staff

The report will provide guidance for staff on the requirements of copyright in the development and use of digital learning resources, including Creative Commons copyright, the use of copyrighted material in a VLE context and Open Educational Resources. Individual Intellectual Property for the ownership of digital artefacts including digital resources, digital capture and storage of lectures.

Theme three: Digital Footprint and Digital Well-Being for Learners

This section will cover guidance on providing advice to learners on their digital presence and well-being, addressing digital engagement which is professional, ethical and safe for learners. This will draw a distinction between learners' social media activities and their academic activities. Considerations will include: digital socialisation and modelling of academic discourse in an online context; forms of online interaction and engagement; moderation of online discussion and approaches to "toxic postings". The work of the University of Edinburgh on Digital Footprint and Safety was identified as an exemplar resource.

Theme four: E-Assessment

This section will highlight the potential offered by mobile technology to facilitate engaged learning in large classes, provide feedback, enable more effective management of assessment including procedures for academic integrity as well as the analytics potential of e-assessment to illustrate cohort and individual engagement. This report will examine a typology of the different forms of e-assessment in terms of engagement, assessment management, analytics and academic integrity.

Theme five: VLE Management

The storage and archiving of curriculum information, student work and student contributions via discussion fora in institutional VLE's as well as distributed digital applications in post learning management systems settings are covered in the report. The report also focuses on developing policies for safe and reliable approaches for institutions in meeting their obligations for the reliability and security of systems for retaining

student work, as well as responsibilities for ancillary digital resources or storage facilities used in teaching and learning, which sit outside the institutional VLE.

2. Teaching and Learning in Irish Education: A Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015-2017 (March 2015)

One of the key goals of the National Forum is to create a digital roadmap to help to guide institutions and organisations in the development of local and national digital strategies and to ensure alignment, coherence and a sense of common endeavour at a sectoral level. In 2017, the Forum launched the All Aboard Digital Skills in Higher Education roadmap and a suite of digital badges (see <http://www.allaboardhe.ie/>).

This report (link below) is designed to inform and guide senior managers, heads of department, schools or faculties and leaders within the higher education sector on developing a digital learning environment and building digital capacity to enhance teaching and learning across the sector. The roadmap identifies the key priorities for change and provides an informed framework for supporting organisations in addressing these priorities. The executive report can be accessed online <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Digital-Roadmap-V2-EXEC-SUMMARY.pdf>

3. Ireland's Higher Education Technical Infrastructure: A review of current context, with implications for teaching and learning enhancement (June 2017)

This report provides a detailed snapshot of the current state-of-play of the technology infrastructure which supports teaching and learning in Irish higher education. The review seeks to enhance and inform the work of the National Forum in assisting Irish higher education institutions in their efforts to achieve a coherent digital future. The full report can be accessed online <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Final-Infrastructure-report-with-doi-web-ready.pdf>

4. Using Learning Analytics to Support the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (June 2017)

The report looks at how learning analytics can be employed to the benefit of academic managers, staff and students. Employed intelligently, it can supply predictive models to better inform approaches to teaching, highlight what is working effectively and what is not and most importantly enable more focussed student interventions. The full report can be accessed online https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Final_LA-Briefing-Paper_Web-with-doi.pdf

5. National Professional Development Framework for All Staff Who Teach in Higher Education (September 2016)

This document describes the National Professional Development Framework for all staff who teach in Irish higher education. The framework provides guidance for the professional development (PD) of individuals and gives direction to other stakeholders (e.g. institutions, higher education networks, educational/academic developers, policy makers and student body representatives) for planning, developing and engaging in professional development activities. This is particularly relevant to GMIT's online learning policy as we engage staff in developing their technology enhanced learning skills, there is an opportunity for staff to reflect and provide evidence of their learning journey mapped against the PDF five domains. The full report can be accessed online <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PD-Framework- FINAL-1.pdf>

6. Understanding and Supporting the Role of Learning Technologists in Irish Higher Education (September 2016)

This briefing paper presents a summary of findings from a qualitative research project conducted by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (National Forum)

exploring the role of Learning Technologists (LTs) in supporting academic staff to enhance teaching and learning in Irish higher education. A recommendation in the GMIT Online Learning Policy is to identify staff for re-training in the LT skills area or recruiting Learning Technologists/Instructional Designers who can work with programme boards in developing their programmes for online learning. This paper is a guide on the role of a learning technologist and how they provide real value in developing the online learning experience. The full paper can be accessed online <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/LT-Briefing-Note-FINAL.pdf>

7. Technology Enhanced Learning Survey (June 2015)
This survey reports on what works and what doesn't work in technology enhanced learning and what inspires and encourages learning and creativity. This survey provides invaluable information about the current state of play in our institutions of higher education. The findings of the survey can be accessed online <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/TEL-FINAL.pdf>
8. Learning Resources and Open Access in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland (July 2015)
This report provides a considered account of some of the key issues which influence the sharing of open educational resources. These include questions of awareness and understanding of open educational resources at individual as well as institutional level, and the value placed on openness as a positive incentive for academic engagement. Acknowledging the complex interplay between these factors, the study suggests important practical steps to take forward OER engagement, including: awareness raising; professional development for academic staff; capturing excellent OERs and continuing relevant and targeted research to support particular OER initiatives. The full report can be accessed <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Project-1-LearningResourcesandOpenAccess-1607.pdf>
9. National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-197,
The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-197, provides a framework of actions that over the five years of the plan to improve equality of opportunity and to ensure that the student body in higher education reflects the diversity of Ireland's population. It sets new and increased targets for participation in higher education of those from the semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic groups, of students with sensory disabilities, mature students and the wider adult population, as well as an increase in participation among Irish Travellers. In addition, it aims at an increase of part-time or flexible higher education participation and commits to a more consistent approach to access support across higher education institutions and progressing a number of projects in order to understand and to measure access data more effectively. A mid-term review of the plan is to be undertaken in early 2018.
10. The National Skills Strategy 2025 aims to make Ireland internationally renowned for its talent, for its highly skilled and adaptive people, equipped with the higher order capabilities required in the 21st century workplace and for its openness to continuous learning. The full report can be accessed https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

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