

Consultation Response to the QQI's White Paper on Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Blended Learning

The Union of Students in Ireland

The Union of Students in Ireland (Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn) is the national representative body for third-level Students' Unions in Ireland. Founded in 1959, USI now represents more than 374,000 students in over forty colleges across the island of Ireland. The goal of USI is to work for the rights of students and a fair and equal third-level education system in Ireland.

USI is a full member of the European Students' Union (ESU) which represents students from 46 National Students' Unions in 39 countries.

Overview

An increasing number of students are now studying through programmes designed substantially or wholly around online teaching and learning, and a number of Irish institutions are now focusing significant effort on developing programmes that can be delivered and supported online. These developments provide challenges for our Member Organisations and student leaders in quality assurance, student support, and in academic representation.

The Higher Education Authority's latest figures¹ reveal that 3% of students in higher education in the Republic of Ireland are 'remote' learners, while the sector as a whole has placed increasing emphasis on the process of digitalisation. In Further Education and Training online, flexible, and blended learning is underpinned by the recent Strategy for Technology-Enhanced Learning. Provision in that sector is arguably much more diverse in nature and mode of study than in Higher Education. In that light, USI welcomes the QQI's White Paper for quality assuring blended learning provision.

As blended learning programmes become a more recognisable aspect of both Higher and Further Education, it is imperative that students who enrol in these programmes expect and experience a quality learning environment. However, while

¹ <http://hea.ie/2018/01/31/student-numbers-in-ireland-top-225000/>

USI recognises that the QQI is still in the early stages of considering quality assurance in purely online provision, the development of these Guidelines highlights the need for statutory quality assurance guidelines covering the broad spectrum of online or remote models of delivery, and that this should now be considered a priority going forward.

The White Paper

Scope

USI seeks to represent the interests and needs of its membership, and a part of this work is to respond to, and inform developments in, the changing landscape of teaching and learning delivery. The development of blended learning presents an opportunity to ensure more of our citizens can access an education, but with this, institutions must give due regard to the demographics of these cohorts, the need for robust academic and personal support, access to services within HEIs that would not be traditionally delivered in an online capacity, and for effective methods of feedback and enhancement.

USI's major concern with the development of remote, online, or blended learning programmes is that they are often designed with teaching delivery through a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), but a holistic approach is not taken to ensure that enrolled students have access across an institution in the way a student on-campus is able to. Therefore, it is imperative that all aspects of an institution are mapped out during programme design, including support and advisory services, policies and procedures, course resources, departmental initiatives, staff capacity, and academic provision. All aspects should be considered in the blended learning context, and all consideration for mainstreaming of provision to ensure that it is adaptive and flexible to that context, are imperative if institutions are developing new programmes.

Use of Technology

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education carried out a detailed Infrastructure Report² on the use or availability of technology in Higher Education in 2017, and found that there was significant under-development in our institutions. The under-utilisation of VLEs in Irish Higher Education is as a result of lack of resource allocation to ensure that they are effective tools for the digitalisation of colleges. Without significant investment in development

² O'Rourke, K.C. (2017) Ireland's Higher Education Technical Infrastructure: A review of current context, with implications for teaching and learning enhancement, *National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning*. Available at: https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Final-Infrastructure-report-with-doi-web-ready.pdf&sa=D&ust=1518628679995000&usg=AFQjCNFADbkmmL9bo3Epbzt0c-Cy_U929w

of VLEs, then the provision of online aspects of blended learning programmes can suffer from under-development and inflexibility to resolve problems as programmes are rolled-out. USI welcomes that the new Guidelines detail the need to invest resource in to design and development, as well as ongoing IT support and administration, with specific reference to organisational challenges that need to be recognised in the creation of blended learning provision.

Staffing

While USI is keen to ensure that institutions are accessible across their services for blended learning students, there must also be a recognition for the need for specialist and highly qualified staff to, not only deliver, but also support the running of programmes that are designed with a blended model. Simply training and adapting existing staff and services to the changes that blended learning brings is not enough, and without dedicated resource, these students are inevitably going to encounter problems within their study. USI welcomes that the new Guidelines set out the need for specialist and professional expertise to support the delivery of blended learning. Without such expertise, it will inevitably become difficult to not only respond to problems, but also to crucially enhance the educational environment.

Student Engagement

The development of any form of remote learning within institutions should recognise the need to involve the student voice. USI is aware of instances in which online or blended programmes, and the students enrolled on those programmes, have not found support services or quality assurance accessible. This includes hampered access to the Students' Union, and the Students' Unions encountering barriers to access these students.

No service within the institutional setting should be inaccessible to any enrolled student. Institutions should be expected to create robust opportunities for communication, with both formal and informal feedback, and a core element of this should be to ensure that from design stage, that student voice and representation opportunities are available to blended learners. Student representation is a core component of the national work to enhance education in Ireland, and forms an important constituent part of quality assurance processes. If due regard is not given to these matters during design, then institutions will be perpetually involved in efforts to rectify this problem. The Students' Union, as the vehicle for the student voice within the HEI, should be a key stakeholder in this developmental work.

USI welcomes that the White Paper lays out the need for robust quality assurance and enhancement procedures, but would like to see a much stronger emphasis on student representation as the vehicle through which effective enhancement occurs.

Conclusion

The Union of Students in Ireland welcomes the development of Statutory Guidelines on Blended Learning, and believes that this represents an important opportunity to develop robust standards for remote learning within Irish third-level education. As the number of programmes and enrollments increases, it is imperative that the student is protected and receives a quality education from their chosen institution. While Guidelines for purely online programmes are not yet viable, USI would like to see further developments in this area as a matter of urgency. Overall, the definition of blended learning is somewhat difficult to scope, and the QQI's work to do this sets an important benchmark of accountability and quality. USI would wish to see more effective benchmarking of the need for student representation as a prerequisite consideration of programme development, but also recognises that this is an emerging field of work within the Irish third-level sector, that could be more effectively resolved through specific Statutory Guidelines for student engagement.