

DKIT POLICY FOR BLENDED AND ONLINE LEARNING

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Policy Aim

The policy aims to provide guidance for individuals and programme teams to enable the development and delivery of blended and online programmes and modules in DkIT. It is based on good practice principles which focus on the design, delivery, support and quality assurance of blended and online modules or programmes.

Introduction

The DkIT Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2020-2022 sets out DkIT's strategic priorities in relation to learning, teaching and assessment and provides a framework for ensuring that these are used to promote student success in line with the vision and priorities set out in the Institute's Strategic Plan 2020-2022. Included in these priorities is a strategic commitment to provide increased opportunities for flexible and lifelong learning using blended and online approaches.

This policy, which will be one element of the Institute's broader Digital Learning policy, supports the strategic objective in DkIT's Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy, which seeks to provide increased opportunities for flexible and lifelong learning using blended and online

approaches. It recognises that modules and programmes which make use of blended or online delivery methods offer students increased flexibility in terms of time and place to facilitate their learning and balance its demands with other commitments. In addition, it emphasises the importance of an intentional design approach when developing curricula that are responsive to the need for increasingly flexible modes of delivery with due consideration to standards and quality.

Context

The development of this policy coincides with the exceptional situation in which both staff and students of Dundalk Institute of Technology and the wider higher education community find themselves as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Emergency remote teaching, which required a sudden shift to online modes of delivery, has been in place for over a year. This has required significant effort and change to practices by staff and students as traditionally face-to-face modules have been adapted for remote delivery. While the longer-term impact of these changes remains unclear, what is certain is that staff and students have been remarkably successful in making the adjustment and, in doing so, have made considerable strides in terms of their skills, capabilities and competences in working in an online environment.

One possible outcome of this situation is the likelihood that it may accelerate the adoption of blended and online approaches to learning which has been identified as a strategic goal for the institute. Should this be the case, it is important to make the distinction between ‘emergency remote teaching’ that was necessitated by the pandemic and design practices required for the delivery of effective blended and online learning. In considering a move to blended and online modes of delivery, we should also reflect on the lessons learned from emergency remote teaching, the successes and the challenges, all of which can inform the design and delivery of blended and online learning.

Moving to Blended and Online Learning

This process requires that modules and programmes purposefully designed and developed for delivery in blended or online environments. Successfully implementing blended and online learning will require more than simply transferring content and activities designed for traditional face-to-face teaching into an online format. At the outset, it should also be emphasised that quality-led development of blended and online modules and programmes can take considerable planning, time commitments and resources. This has been noted by QQI who caution that “at organisational level, it is necessary to demonstrate an understanding of the distinctive demands that blended learning will make on infrastructure and systems that differ from full-time face-to-face contexts. Where the nature of high quality online learning or other aspects of remote learning is not properly understood, provision that was originally designed for a face-to-face learning environment may be poorly adapted for learners” (Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) 2018, p.8).

Defining Blended and Online Learning

Since it was first used in the 1990’s the term ‘blended learning’ has taken on many different meanings and has become an umbrella term which can be applied in a variety of contexts (Hrastinski 2019). The absence of a universally accepted definition (Moskal et al. 2013), has resulted in a lack of clarity and consistency associated of the term. While the lack of specificity is problematic, it may also be beneficial in that it allows blended learning to be defined locally to recognise the particular context in which it is used (Smith and Hill 2019). For this reason, it is

essential that we arrive at a common understanding of the term for the purposes of this policy for our institutional context. In the following section, we will outline a number of different definitions that have been proposed with a view to settling on a definition which will guide the policy.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) define blended learning as

“the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004).

Other definitions from the literature extend this definition to include a more explicit element of intentionality in this integration. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) define blended learning as

“the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences”.

Torrissi-Steele (2011) continues this theme in describing blended learning as

“enriched, student-centred learning experiences being made possible by the harmonious integration of various strategies, achieved by combining F2F interaction with ICT”

Morris and Laurillard (2016) incorporated the design aspect into their understanding of blended learning as

“an appropriate mix of face-to-face and online learning activities, using traditional instruction, guided support and independent learning, underpinned by the use of digital technologies and designed using strong pedagogical principles, to support learner engagement, flexibility and success”.

While these definitions vary to some extent, there appears to be a consensus that blended learning “revolves around a pedagogically sound combination of face-to-face and online elements” (Armellini and Padilla Rodriguez 2021, p.14).

Although efforts have been made to develop a more specific definition, particularly in relation to the ratio of face-to-face and online activities, there still remains no consensus in this aspect. However, Graham et al. (2013) provide a useful model to position blended and online learning in terms of the combination of face-to-face and online components (Figure 1).

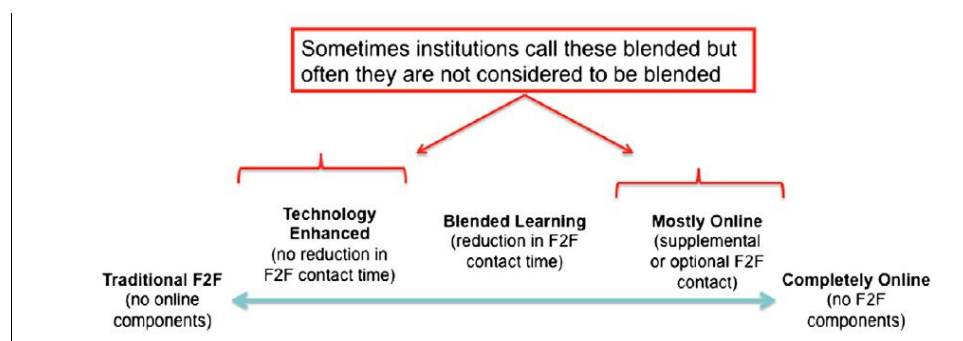


Figure 1: Spectrum of course delivery modes (Graham et al. 2013, p. 5)

For the purposes of this policy, we will consider blended and online learning in terms of this spectrum of learning activities ranging from fully face-to-face with no online activity at one extreme to fully online with no face-to-face activity at the other (Graham et al. 2013). Table 1 outlines working definitions of some of the types of delivery modes on this spectrum.

Table 1: Definitions of some delivery modes

Delivery mode	Description
1. Face-to-face	This is the traditional mode which is organised around scheduled class meetings. No online technologies are used to support teaching and learning
2. Technology-enhanced (Web-enhanced)	Online activities are used complement classroom sessions without reducing the number of contact hours. In some cases, however, online activity may replace a small proportion of face-to-face classroom time.
3. Synchronous Distributed	Web-based technologies are used to provide access to classroom activities for students at remote sites in real-time. This type of module may have a mix of on-campus and remote students simultaneously, with on-campus students being in the classroom with the teacher and remote students being in a single location or several locations.
4. Blended (or Hybrid)	Combines face-to-face classroom activities with online activity. This online activity makes up a significant proportion of the total teaching time assigned to the module. One might consider this as online learning <i>replacing</i> face-to-face contact time.
5. Blended online (Mostly online)	Most activity is done online but there is a small number of face-to-face activities. Modules delivered in this mode are often termed online modules.
6. Online (Completely Online)	All activity takes place online, either synchronously or asynchronously, and there are no face-to-face classroom sessions. All elements are delivered online and the student is not required to be on campus.

Adapted from Graham et al. (2013) and Sener (2015).

In this table, Categories 1 and 2 describe what we normally call face-to-face modules or programmes. Blended modules or programmes (Category 4) involve the replacement of face-to-face activities (i.e. contact time) with online activities which may be synchronous (i.e. occurring live or in real-time) or asynchronous (i.e. occurring at a different time, place and pace). Categories 5 and 6 describe online modules or programmes that will primarily involve online activities (synchronous or asynchronous) but Category 5 may still include a small proportion of face-to-face contact. In summary, online modes of delivery, then, have significantly reduced or no elements of face-to-face contact and depend, for the most part or totally, on online learning activities.

Blended and Online Modes of Learning for DkIT

For the purposes of this policy, we consider that blended and online modes of learning to have two key elements:

- a) varying proportions of face-to-face activities replaced by online activities and
- b) the intentional design which integrates these for a particular context.

In each mode, face-to-face contact time is replaced by online activities to varying degrees. Mostly online or fully online modes of delivery, which we will categorise simply as online, have significantly reduced or no elements of face-to-face contact, depending for the most part or totally on online learning activities. The re-design of modules or programmes for blended or online delivery will involve *replacing* face-to-face time with online time. The ratio of face-to-face and online activities for each mode will depend on the context of a particular module or programme.

In each mode, face-to-face, synchronous online and asynchronous online activities should then be purposefully integrated to ensure the alignment and coherence to facilitate student engagement and success. In terms of flexibility for students, the use of synchronous online activities will offer flexibility of place whereas asynchronous activities provide flexibility of both place and time.

As with the traditional face-to-face approach, the design process will encompass many dimensions of pedagogy that will interact with each other. In this process, it is important to be cognisant of the advice that “rather than focusing solely on the proportions of a module or programme delivered in the classroom or online, we need to recognise that the ideal blend for a course is contextual: it will vary from one iteration of the course to the next, from one student cohort to another, from one tutor to another, within and between disciplines” (Armellini and Padilla Rodriguez 2021, p.15), to the extent that no two blended learning designs will be identical (Hrastinski 2019), apart perhaps from the structure in terms of notional contact hours.

Guiding Principles for Blended and Online Learning Delivery Design

The design of blended and online modules and programmes at DkIT will be guided by the following principles which focus on the key areas of design, delivery, support and quality enhancement.

Principle 1:

Designing for blended and online delivery will be based on good practice learning design principles

Implementation guidelines:

1. The design and delivery of blended or online modules and programmes should be based on evidence-informed learner-centred pedagogical principles and focused on the student learning experience.
2. The design process for blended or online modules and programmes will make use of an appropriate learning design framework¹.
3. There should be a blend of synchronous and asynchronous activities in a module or programme which are aligned to offer a coherent learning experience. The proportions of face-to-face, synchronous online and asynchronous activities in this blend will depend on the context of the module or programme.
4. The principle of constructive alignment should guide the design of assessments, teaching and learning activities and the technologies used.

Principle 2:

Designing for blended and online delivery will use a programme-level approach

Implementation guidelines:

1. Programme teams can ensure coherence and consistency in delivery by using a systematic approach to design at programme level.
2. The design of individual modules should be aligned with the overall programmatic approach and take into account the overall stage of the programme.
3. Programme design teams will, insofar as possible, ensure a consistent set of technology tools to be used across a stage or programme.
4. A Programme Delivery Outline document will provide an overview of the delivery modes used in each module on the programme².

Principle 3:

Students will have a consistent and coherent learning experience

Implementation guidelines:

1. The Virtual Learning Environment will be the primary tool for all modules/programmes to promote student engagement, responsibility and independent learning.
2. To ensure a level of consistency in the student experience of the virtual learning environment, each module will adhere to a baseline design based on good practice³.

¹ Examples include Carpe Diem and ABC Learning Design (see Appendix 1 - Glossary of Terms)

² See Appendix 2 – Programme Delivery Outline

³ See Appendix 4 – Moodle Module Page Design Guidelines

3. As in the traditional face-to-face environment there should be a variety of assessment types which are aligned to and appropriate for the delivery mode.
4. Regular and timely feedback, either formal or informal, is particularly important in the blended or online environment to increase student motivation and engagement. This feedback, combined with regular communication, will also enhance teacher visibility and presence.
5. A minimum set of technology requirements for participation in a blended or online programme will be specified in advance for students.

Principle 4:

Teachers and students will be supported in preparing for and engaging in blended and online learning

Implementation guidelines

1. Opportunities for Continuing Professional Development will continue to be offered through the MA in Learning and Teaching, training events, guest presentations and sharing practice events.
2. A suite of resources related to blended and online learning will be available on the VLE to support teachers and students.
3. Individual teachers and programme teams will be provided with guidance, training and support in the design of blended or online modules/programmes.
4. Training and support in good practice in online teaching and pedagogy will be available for teachers and programme teams.
5. Training and support in the use of appropriate technology applications will be available for students and teachers.
6. Students will have access to support services, information, tools and resources necessary to enable learning and engagement.
7. Blended or online delivery will be supported by a consistent, reliable and scalable IT infrastructure and a range of learning resources and software.
8. Students will have an orientation to blended or online learning in order develop familiarity with the technology, set expectations and begin the process of socialisation. The forming of relationships through interaction and collaboration is recognised as essential for student engagement in blended or online learning, particularly in the early weeks of a module or programme.
9. Consideration will be given to the time and supports required to design and deliver in blended/online environments, recognising that traditional teaching allocations based on contact hours in face-to-face environments may not adequately capture the workload involved.

Principle 5:

Quality assurance and enhancement processes will maintain the quality of the student experience in blended and online environments

Implementation guidelines

1. Quality assurance and enhancement practices will guide all stages of the development and delivery of blended or online modules/programmes.
2. To ensure consistency and coherence of the student experience, programme design teams will provide an overview of the programme structure containing details of the delivery mode for each module.

3. Ongoing evaluation of modules and programmes will be used to enhance the learning and teaching experience. Student feedback, including mid-module and end-of-module reviews, will inform the delivery of a module or programme.
4. Regular monitoring and analysis of data from the VLE and other sources will be used to enhance module and programme delivery.

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Appendix 1 – Glossary of Terms

Asynchronous teaching and learning: This refers to teaching and learning that is not restricted by time or place. The teacher and student do not have to be in the same physical or virtual location at the same time. Asynchronous learning typically involves the use of learning resources made available on the virtual learning environment. Examples of asynchronous learning activities include readings, video and audio resources, quizzes, discussion forums.

Emergency remote teaching: This has been defined as “a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated”(Hodges et al. 2020).

Learning design: Learning design is a pedagogically informed decision-making process for structuring and developing learning activities. It involves decisions relating to a range of elements which make up a module or programme, including structure, pedagogic approaches, content and resources, assessment, sequencing of activities and technology tools(Beetham and Sharpe 2020). Beetham and Sharpe, who coined the term ‘design for learning’, emphasise that “learning can never be wholly designed, only designed *for*, from principled intentions but with an awareness of the contingent nature of learning as it actually takes place” (Beetham and Sharpe 2020, p.9).

Two approaches or frameworks that are widely used for learning design are:

Carpe Diem (<https://www.gillysalmon.com/carpe-diem.html>)

and

ABC Learning Design (<https://abc-ld.org/>).

Synchronous teaching and learning: This refers to teaching and learning situation in which the teacher and student are in the same learning environment at the same time. Examples include traditional face-to-face lectures, tutorials and practical sessions and live online classes or webinars.

Virtual Learning Environment: A virtual learning environment (VLE) is a web-based platform which is used to support learning. A VLE such as Moodle provides a range of features for supporting assessment, feedback, communication and collaboration in a module in addition to different modes of sharing learning resources.

Appendix 2 - Programme Delivery Outline

This template should be completed for every stage of the programme to provide an overview of the delivery modes used for each module.

Programme title				
Programme delivery mode (Face-to-face (F), Blended (B), Online (O))				
Learning design approach (Please provide a brief outline of the design model or framework which has guided the design of the programme)				
Overview of modules				
Stage			Semester	
Module title	Mode (F, B, O)	Face-to-face hours	Synchronous online hours	Asynchronous online hours
Module 1	B	3 (1 L, 2 P)	1 (L)	1
Module 2	O		2 (L)	1
Module 3	F	3 (2 L, 1 T)		
Module 4	B	2 (F)		1
Module 5	B	2 (1 L, 1 T)	1 (L)	
	Totals			

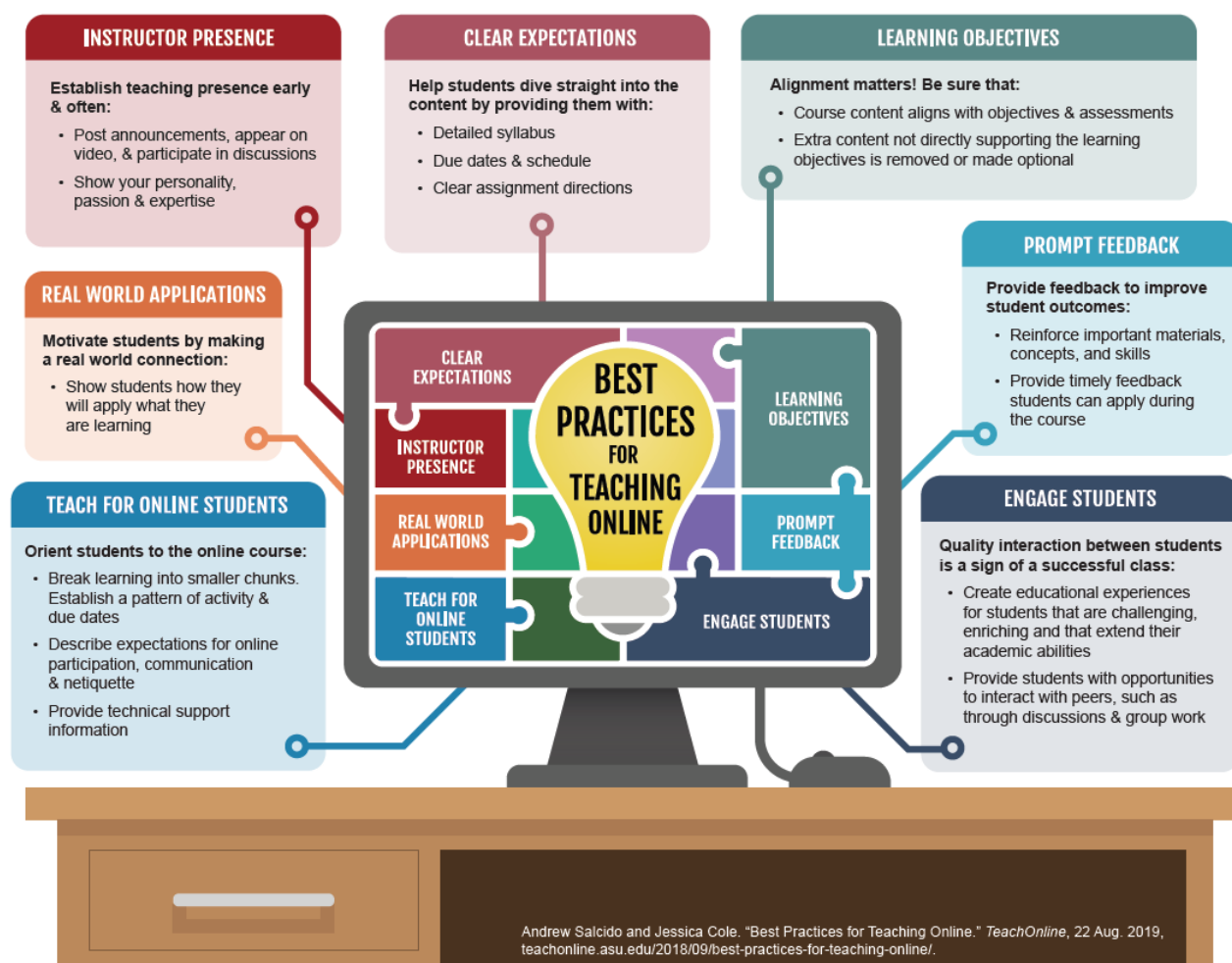
Stage			Semester	
Module title	Mode (F, B, O)	Face-to-Face hours	Synchronous online hours	Asynchronous online hours
	Totals			

Stage			Semester	
Module title	Mode (F, B, O)	Face-to-Face hours	Synchronous online hours	Asynchronous online hours
	Totals			

Appendix 3 - Some Good Practice Guides and Resources

Online Teaching - landscape

The following infographic by Andrew Salcido and Jessica Cole outlines key elements of good practice for teaching online. These principles can also apply in face-to-face and blended environments.



A downloadable version of this infographic and further resources are available at:

<https://teachonline.asu.edu/2018/09/best-practices-for-teaching-online/>

Moodle

The DkIT Learning with Moodle module (<https://2021-moodle.dkit.ie/course/view.php?id=984>) contains a range of resources and guidelines for online learning, teaching and assessment.

The University College London (UCL) Moodle guides provide a range of resources and guidance in using Moodle for learning, teaching and assessment. These are available at:

<https://wiki.ucl.ac.uk/display/MoodleResourceCentre/UCL+Moodle+Staff+Guide>

Appendix 4 - Moodle Module Page Design Guidelines

The following design guidelines are recommended as a baseline design on your Moodle page. The purpose of these guidelines is to enhance the student experience of using the Moodle page by providing a consistent, simple, clearly-structured and navigable page.

Guiding principles

- Consider the page from the student's point of view.
- Ensure that the page is navigable and avoid students having to scroll too much.
- Be consistent in naming and layout.
- Provide clear signposting and instructions.

Recommended Elements to include in your Module

- **Welcome message:** Include a Welcome message at the beginning of the module, possibly using one or more media formats such as text, audio or video.
- **Module information:** Include a section on general Module information at the top of the page. This section might include a copy of the module descriptor, a short overview of the course, expectations for online engagement where applicable, details of expectations for communication, your availability and expected response times.
- **Assessment information:** Consider including a specific section on Assessment information (including, for example, assessment outlines, briefs, criteria, exemplars and submission links), where students can go to find all assessment-related activities and resources.
- **Live online classes:** Provide links and times for live online classes (e.g. BigBlueButton, Teams, Zoom) in the Module Information section or in a separate section.

Communication

- **Announcements:** Make regular use of the Announcements forum to communicate with students
- **Contact details:** Provide students with information including your contact details, availability and possibly a picture. This could be placed in a HTML block at the side of the page.
- **Student queries forum:** Consider using a discussion forum as a space for student queries that can be answered by other students or the teacher.

Navigation and Layout

- **Topics format:** Use the Collapsed Topics or Tiles format to make the page simpler and more easily navigable. Try to avoid students having to scroll too much to find resources and activities on the page.
- **Section titles:** Label page sections or topics with meaningful titles to aid student navigation.
- **Meaningful names:** Give each activity or resource a clear and meaningful name so that students can easily identify what they are looking for.
- **Labels for sub-sections:** Use labels within sections for sub-headings under which activities and resources are grouped in order to guide students e.g. Notes/presentation, links; recommended reading; activities.
- **Off-page content:** Use features such as Folders, Pages or Books to reduce cognitive load by not having all content visible on the main page, reducing the length of each section and, consequently, the amount of scrolling required of students.
- **Indenting:** Consider indenting resources and activities within subsections.

Other Suggestions

- **Student view:** Switch to the Student role regularly to check your page from the student perspective to ensure that resources and activities are displayed and working as intended.
- **Clear instructions:** Include, for activities such as assignments, quizzes, discussion forums, clear instructions for students, particularly if these activities are to be graded.
- **Guidance and practice:** Provide students with instructions or guidance on how to use activities that they are unfamiliar with, such as assignment submission, assignment activity with Turnitin, quiz, discussion forum, demonstrating them using the student role and also giving students an opportunity to practise these in a dry-run before attempting the required.
- **Additional blocks:** Consider making use of blocks such as Completion Progress, Activities, Latest News and Calendar to enhance student motivation and engagement.

Moodle Page Checklist

You may find it helpful to use these points as a checklist as you consider making incremental changes to your pages.

Recommended elements

- ☐ Welcome message
- ☐ Module information section
- ☐ Assessment information section
- ☐ Live Online classes section

Communication

- ☐ Announcements
- ☐ Contact details
- ☐ Student queries forum

Navigation and layout

- ☐ Tiles or Collapsed Topics format
- ☐ Section titles
- ☐ Meaningful names
- ☐ Labels for sub-sections
- ☐ Off-page content
- ☐ Indenting

Other suggestions

- ☐ Student view
- ☐ Clear instructions
- ☐ Guidance and practice
- ☐ Additional blocks