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Developing Enabling QA Frameworks for Blended Learning

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A strong culture of quality that promotes sustainable stakeholder engagement ultimately underpins quality resilience, that is, the ability of our quality frameworks to support dynamic environments in times of challenge and uncertainty. This article suggests areas for providers to focus on as they continue to develop the capacity of their QA frameworks to support the delivery of blended learning.

All higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland, to ensure a consistent learning experience for students, are required to set out quality standards that align with requirements by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Irish quality assurance (QA) agency, and ultimately with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) for QA (ENQA, 2015). This article discusses the nature of QA frameworks as a complex area requiring strategic direction. It discusses the Higher Education Colleges' Association (HECA) members' experience of developing enabling quality culture through re-engagement with QQI. Finally, it reflects on the journey of HECA's Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF) towards creating enabling QA frameworks for blended learning.

QA is a 'wicked issue'

The complex nature of quality frameworks and diverse applications of policies and procedures in higher education align with many of the characteristics of 'wicked policy issues'. These are issues that do not fit our mould of existing experience and are by nature unpredictable and difficult to resolve (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Characteristics of wicked policy issues include the involvement of multiple stakeholders with different values and priorities and the absence of one 'right answer'. Because policies are applied in multiple contexts where no two situations are ever the same, there is no exhaustible list of solutions to matters arising, as the list of alternative scenarios that could arise in the education environment is endless.

The wicked nature of QA means that the development of quality culture requires a wicked strategy (Camillus, 2008) that promotes sustainable stakeholder engagement and is adaptable in complex, changeable situations. We posit that a strong quality culture is required for the effective implementation of quality frameworks, and that this ultimately underpins quality resilience: the ability of our quality frameworks to support dynamic environments in times of challenge and uncertainty.

Developing Enabling QA Frameworks for Blended Learning



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Developing an enabling quality culture through re-engagement with QQI

Broadly speaking, quality assurance can be thought of on a continuum that begins with putting a QA framework in place that ensures accountability and that ultimately, when implemented effectively, enables transformation and quality enhancement of the learning environment (Lomas, 2004; Elassy, 2015). The European Standards and Guidelines (ENQA, 2015) proposed that the duality of accountability and enhancement can lead to QA whereby internal stakeholders, from students and academic staff to institutional leaders and managers, assume responsibility for quality and engage in QA at all levels of the institution.

The capacity for QA frameworks to both assure accountability and transform the learning environment depends upon that culture. However, negative perceptions of QA in higher education can create barriers to QA's potential to enable quality enhancement (QE). QA is often viewed as a 'burdensome extra' that infringes on academic autonomy and increases bureaucracy (Harvey & Williams, 2010); further issues in quality in higher education can be due to a lack of clarity on ethical standards appropriate to management (Loveluck, 1995).

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To challenge this negative perception and to support staff and students to engage with QA, effective communication and authentic engagement are fundamental to the QA role. In this way, it can be seen as a supportive structure that provides consistency to students and staff; that helps us not only to meet regulatory requirements but also to maintain the integrity of, and continually enhance, the learning environment. As it turned out, re-engaging with QQI presented a wicked strategy that promoted quality culture and resilience.

QQI was established in November 2012 by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012. Under this Act, all HEIs were required to have their QA procedures approved by QQI in a process named 're-engagement'. At the beginning of 2016, HEIs began this journey towards re-engaging with QQI. For private HEIs, the intention of re-engagement was to enable providers to take full ownership of their QA procedures in a more autonomous and sustainable way (QQI, 2016).

Re-engaging with QQI was a significant undertaking for both providers and QQI. Ultimately, it was a reflective process facilitated by external peer-review panels that sought to assess the lived experience of providers' quality culture. This required genuine reflection on, and review of, existing provider QA frameworks to ensure they were fit for purpose and were an accurate representation of practice. Authentic consultation with a broad range of stakeholders, including support staff, administrative staff, academic staff, senior management, and learners, was integral to the process, as well as demonstrating effective QA communication across our institutions. The process also compelled providers to consider the robustness of their QA frameworks in terms of longevity, scalability, and capacity to respond to change and risk in the tertiary education environment.

Throughout the process of re-engagement, the thirteen member colleges of HECA have shared their experiences formally and informally to support their peers across the sector. Additionally, sharing experience and feedback remained a standing agenda item throughout 2018/19 for HECA's Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF), where enabling QA remains a prominent theme of discussion and has become a formal element of our work plan throughout 2020/21.

HAQEF's journey into enabling QA frameworks for blended learning

HAQEF has established itself as a community of shared practice, peer learning, and peer support over the last two years. HAQEF is composed of representatives of HECA colleges who come from a variety of roles across both QA and teaching- and learning-specific roles, bringing a diverse blend of regulatory and academic perspectives and experiences to the group. Whether in QA or in teaching, learning, and assessment (TLA) roles, members all have a common goal in mind as they work to maintain and enhance a high-quality learning environment for staff and students, who are supported by provider-specific QA frameworks.

Following successful collaboration on the institutional application of the National Forum's Professional Development Framework (National Forum, 2016) throughout 2019/20 (Ní Bheoláin, 2019), HAQEF established its work plan for 2020/21 to include Quality Assurance Enabling Student Success in a Digital World, with a particular focus on QA frameworks that support blending learning delivery, which also presented complex wicked issues for discussion.

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Before the onset of the public health emergency in March 2020, HECA colleges were at different stages of development on the use of blended learning and the QA of such delivery. Some members had re-engaged with QQI on the basis that all programmes from that provider were predicated on blended TLA. Some had differential QA for a limited number of blended learning programmes, while core QA was based on fully face-to-face delivery. Some used a virtual learning environment for mainly repository purposes but did not deliver through a blended model, and some had never needed to engage their students in a virtual learning environment. It was therefore very timely that work in this area had commenced in early 2020.

Initially, members worked together to conduct a gap analysis and to map considerations and guidelines against QQI's core QA criteria (QQI, 2016), in order to identify areas of impact for integrating blending learning into existing QA frameworks. Arising from the vast range of experiences of members and ensuing discussions, we suggest the following areas for additional vigilance for providers as they continue to develop the capacity of their QA frameworks to supported blended learning delivery:

- Ensuring that TLA strategy supports a high-quality learning experience for all students in all teaching delivery modes, by taking specific pedagogical considerations for blending and online learning.
- Renewing focus on academic integrity, ethical considerations, and appropriateness of different modes of assessment, including

the provision of training to enhance assessment, both digital and assessment literacy, for staff and students, to promote engagement and academic integrity.

- Addressing the renewed and pressing need to explore the role of learning analytics and the use of data.
- Being cognisant of legal requirements, including compliance of all elements with data protection, copyright, and jurisdictional issues in the provision of online learning.
- Ensuring appropriate expertise of all staff, including part-time academics and external examiners, through the provision of ongoing professional development activities.
- Clear communication of structures for mitigating disadvantage and how procedures for reasonable accommodation can be used by learners who are experiencing any type of disadvantage.
- Renewing QA processes for completing online governance and assessment-related procedures, including online grading, online moderation, and conducting online examination boards, and considering the adaptability of both technical and QA approval systems to cope with change.
- Renewing the importance of peer learning and feedback, and of involvement with broader sectoral bodies, networks, and associations, as well as continuing the focus on national and international – particularly European – developments on the quality-assuring of blended and online delivery, such as QQI's topic-specific statutory guidelines for blended learning (QQI, 2018), ACODE (2014), EADTU (2007), and Quality Matters (2018).

In considering any development to QA frameworks, we urge QA professionals to lean on QA culture in collaboration with diverse audiences to ensure that ongoing development is robust, authentic, and fit for purpose across the tertiary education sector.

To 2020/21 and beyond

HAQEF will continue with its focus in this area of creating enabling blended learning QA frameworks throughout 2020/21, with planned activities including seminars, a colloquium workshop series, and the development of resources. Contemporaneous survey results and feedback published by the National Forum, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), and QQI (in particular) are fully considered during this ongoing collaborative work. We are continually grateful for the engagement of various bodies such the National Forum, the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), QQI, and many individuals for their contributions and engagement.

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Prof Anna Davies wins ERC Public Engagement with Research Award for social media outreach

Anna Davies is the winner of the inaugural European Research Council Public Engagement with Research Award for social media-led engagement around the ShareCity project. Anna is Professor of Geography, Environment and Society in the School of Natural Sciences at Trinity College Dublin.



The ShareCity team, led by Professor Davies, is transforming cities onto more sustainable pathways by developing deeper theoretical understanding of contemporary food sharing; generating comparative international data about food sharing activities within cities; assessing the impact of food sharing activities; and exploring how food sharing in cities might evolve in the future.

"Public engagement has been crucial to the SHARECITY project and it has been a team effort throughout our research," Professor Anna Davies said.

"It has enriched our findings significantly and I would encourage all researchers to explore opportunities to enhance their public engagement and create science for the public good."