

Policy: *Blended Learning Policy*

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Owner: Office of the Registrar



TITLE: *BLENDED LEARNING POLICY*

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	Blended Learning Framework completely revised to align with QQI's Guidelines for Blended and Fully Online Learning (2023).	Review Date	24 June 2028 or as required
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1. Purpose of Policy

Carlow College, St. Patrick's (hereafter Carlow College) is a provider of third-level education, with a number of the College's programmes delivered in a blended learning format to learners resident in Ireland.¹ Carlow College first began delivering programmes online during the COVID-19 pandemic. The College delivered its first blended learning programme, the Higher Diploma in Politics and Society, in January 2023, followed by a number of blended certificate programmes (minor awards and special purpose awards) in September 2023, validated by South East Technological University (SETU). In September 2024, Carlow College commenced the delivery of the BA (Hons) Applied Social Studies (Professional Social Care) as a blended learning programme, validated by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

QQI requires that providers of such programmes have due regard to QQI's [Guidelines for Blended and Fully Online Learning \(2023\)](#) to ensure that sufficient quality assurance procedures are in place for the delivery of programmes in a blended learning context. This policy covers all programmes offered by Carlow College which contains an online learning component, in part or in total.

The purpose of the policy is:

- (1) To provide a quality assurance framework for the College's strategic aims to be a provider of blended learning programmes;
- (2) To provide a quality assurance framework for the design and delivery of blended learning programmes with regard to with QQI's [Guidelines for Blended and Fully Online Learning \(2023\)](#);
- (3) To ensure that Carlow College has the required technological supports in place to deliver online learning;
- (4) To ensure that staff are sufficiently trained and supported to deliver courses in blended learning contexts;
- (5) To ensure learners are appropriately supported in their learning and have remote access to the learning resources to be able to undertake their studies;
- (6) To ensure prospective and enrolled learners are given sufficient information about the online learning requirements of their programme; and
- (7) To ensure that there is appropriate administrative support for blended learning programmes.

In compliance with QQI's [Guidelines for Blended and Fully Online Learning \(2023\)](#), this policy is supported by the [Blended Learning Handbook for Staff](#), which sets out in further detail the College's approach to and / or regulations regarding the following:

¹ Carlow College blended learning programmes are not offered to learners outside of Ireland.

- (1) Proposal, development and design of blended learning programmes;
- (2) Curriculum design, digital learning materials, assessment and feedback matters;
- (3) Admissions, registration and induction procedures;
- (4) Course commencement procedures for administrative and academic staff;
- (5) Examination, monitoring and review of blended learning programmes (QQI and SETU-validated);
- (6) Information to be made available to learners in learner programme handbooks, on the VLE and on the college website;
- (7) Learner supports systems and facilities;
- (8) Staff development and training supports;
- (9) IT systems

1.1 Benefits of Blended Learning

Since the introduction of technologies that enable remote learning in higher education, the benefits of blended learning have been recognised as well as debated. The College's approach to blended learning is that it should only be introduced where there are clear benefits to learners. Benefits to learners include:

- Greater flexibility for people in employment or time-poor learners who may not be able to attend college during regular hours or have limited time to physically attend college.
- Opportunity to take a programme that might otherwise be inaccessible to them.
- Enhanced opportunities for work-life balance by choosing a programme that suits them.
- Enhanced opportunity to avail of flexible learning.

2. Definitions

Carlow College uses the definition of blended learning in QQI's [*Guidelines for Blended and Fully Online Learning \(2023\)*](#). Blended learning is 'a type of programme where teaching,

learning and assessment occur using a mix of on-site and online learning, with the online components taking place synchronously, asynchronously, or in combination'.²

2.1 Synchronous Learning

Teachers and learners gather at the same time and virtual place and interacting in “real-time”.

2.2 Asynchronous Learning

Learners access online materials at their own pace and interact with their teacher and peers at times that work around other commitments.

3. Scope of Policy

This policy applies to College stakeholders engaged in the proposal, development, promotion, administration, support, delivery, monitoring and review of blended learning programmes.

4. Policy Statement

This policy has been developed in support the College’s strategic aim to develop blended learning programmes as articulated in the Teaching and Learning Objective of the [College Strategic Plan, 2023-2028](#) and the *College Programme Development Strategy 2023-2028*. This policy is also aligned to the institutional approach to developing and delivering programmes as set out in the college [Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, 2024-2029](#).

4.1 Types of blended programmes offered at Carlow College

Blended learning programmes at Carlow College may be offered in the following modes:

- (1) Blended – Synchronous Only. These are programmes where there is a mixture of onsite and synchronous online learning.
- (2) Blended – Synchronous and Asynchronous. These are programmes where there is mixture of onsite and synchronous and/or asynchronous online learning.

² QQI’s *Guidelines for Blended and Fully Online Learning* (2023), p. 9.

4.2 Scope of Blended Learning Programmes

Carlow College offers blended learning in the following programme contexts:

- (1) BA (Hons) in Applied Social Studies (Professional Social Care), Level 8, validated by QQI³;
- (2) Postgraduate Programmes, Level 8 and 9, validated by SETU⁴; and
- (3) Special Purpose or Minor Awards leading to a Level 7 or Level 8 awards, validated by SETU.

The following restrictions apply:

- (1) Carlow College offers blended learning programmes for learners resident in Ireland only.
- (2) The development of blended learning programmes is focused on SETU-validated programmes at certificate and postgraduate level.
- (3) New and existing undergraduate programmes will remain face-to-face, with the exception of the BA (Hons) in Applied Social Studies (Professional Social Care).

4.3 Principles of Blended Learning

Carlow College recognises that, as an evolving field, the delivery of blended programmes presents distinct challenges and opportunities for both staff and learners involved in the programmes, as well as the College as a whole. The College's overall approach to blended learning is that it should never be introduced for convenience, but only where there are benefits to the learner, clear consistency with the [Blended Learning Strategy](#) and *Programme Developmental Strategy*, compatible and sustainable with college resources, and supported by evidence from market research, learner feedback, up-to-date research into the benefits of online learning, and/or other evidential sources.

Carlow College is committed to ensuring the following:

4.3.1 Quality Assurance

- (1) College policies and procedures pertaining to the design and delivery of blended learning programmes are up-to-date and fit-for-purpose.

³ Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

⁴ South East Technological University.

4.3.2 Programme Proposal, Approval, Development and Design

- (1) Blended Learning Programmes proposals are aligned to the aims and principles in the Carlow College [Blended Learning Strategy](#), *Carlow College Programme Development Strategy* and QQI's [Guidelines for Providers of Online and Blended Learning Programmes](#).⁵
- (2) Blended learning programmes are developed using the Carlow College [Quality Assurance Policy](#); specifically the relevant procedures for programme development and approval (see Section 4.3 of the *Quality Assurance Policy*). The procedures for programme development are detailed in the *Quality Assurance Policy: Appendices* (see [Appendix 13: Programme Development and Approval](#)).
- (3) Programme Design Teams must have due regard to the *Principles of Blended Learning Programme Design* laid out in Section 1.1 of the [Blended Learning Handbook for Staff](#).
- (4) Proposals to be submitted to bodies other than QQI (e.g., SETU) for validation follow the same initial internal process as those validated by QQI. Approval and validation of these programmes follow the procedures set out by those bodies.

4.3.3 Staff Qualifications and Training

Carlow College recognises that the design and delivery of online learning modes requires specific skills and expertise that are different to face-to-face programmes. Carlow College is committed to ensuring that:

- (1) Staff recruited to or charged with designing programmes that contain online learning are sufficiently qualified and / or trained to do so through training opportunities and CPD related to blended learning.
- (2) Staff teaching in blended learning contexts are trained in pedagogical practices and understand and can utilise digital learning tools.
- (3) The College provides ongoing support and training for staff through targeted continuous professional development and training opportunities to enable them to deliver excellence in teaching on blended learning programmes.

For more on the processes governing staff recruitment, see the [Recruitment and Selection Policy](#).

⁵ See 'Programme Context', QQI's *Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes* (October 2023), pp. 31-43.

4.3.4 Learning, Teaching and Assessment

The College's overall approach to blended learning, teaching and assessment is governed by the [Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2024-2029](#) and is supported by continuous professional development and staff training in the principles and practices of blended teaching and learning. Carlow College is committed to ensuring that:

- (1) Blended learning programmes incorporate the principles of Universal Design for Learning, as set out in the [Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2024-2029](#).
- (2) Both general and specific learning outcomes supported by Carlow College's [Learning and Teaching Policy](#)⁶ are achievable, namely: (a) maintaining and developing the learning environment in relation to the delivery, learning and assessment modes; (b) learner accessibility to the built environment and to online resources used in the College.
- (3) Clear information is provided to learners about the specific learning, teaching and assessment modes and learner effort requirements in blended learning contexts in student handbooks, programme Moodle pages, and module Moodle pages.
- (4) All learners on blended learning programmes at Carlow College have access to face-to-face interactions with staff and fellow learners, through inductions and / or additional scheduled on-site classes or workshops.

4.3.5 IT and Educational Technology

IT Systems

Carlow College is committed to ensuring that there is a planned approach to the provision of sufficient IT infrastructure to deliver an online learning environment for learners and that there are clear guidelines in place for the use of technologies. The following procedures and policies related to IT systems are in place:

- (1) The College has an infrastructure budget that is allocated annually, which provides for ongoing operational costs and upgrades to support blended learning. The allocation includes software licenses, hardware procurement, and technical support, ensuring that the required resources for IT systems and digital platforms are sustained throughout the academic year.
- (2) Annual reviews are carried out by the IT Department to ensure that there is sufficient technological capability through investment in information technology infrastructure that it is fit-for-purpose and can support interactive learning and teaching opportunities for all learners and staff. These are discussed by the Learning, Teaching and Assessment

⁶ Carlow College Learning and Teaching Policy, p. 3.

Committee and, if it is deemed a significant additional cost, will sent to the Academic Council and / or the Management Board for further consideration.

- (3) In the event of disruption to IT that results in the prevention of the effective delivery of synchronous classes, classes are postponed as they would be on campus. Classes will be rescheduled.
- (4) In the event of long-term IT disruption, the College will initiate the Critical Incident Policy and provide clear directives to learners and staff.

Educational Technology

Carlow College recognises that the provision of blended learning requires clarity on the resources to be used in the design and delivery of programmes, as well as continuous improvement in the College's educational technology capacity and resources. Carlow College is committed to ensuring that:

- (1) Only approved platforms are used. All blended learning programmes at Carlow College exclusively utilise the Moodle VLE and Microsoft Teams for online learning. No other platforms should be used unless sanctioned by the College.
- (2) A list of approved digital tools is maintained by the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee and made available to staff involved in the design and delivery of programmes.
- (3) The College will continue to develop expertise in educational technologies and tools and as well as providing training for staff in the use of technologies and online pedagogy.

4.3.6 Admissions, Registration and Induction

- (1) Admissions, registration and induction of learners on blended learning programmes are subject to the [Learner Admission, Progression and Recognition Policy](#).

4.3.7 Public Information

- (1) Carlow College is committed to providing key information to learners on blended programmes around admission, registration and induction processes.
- (2) Carlow College is committed to communicating clear information to prospective and enrolled learners on the technological requirements of their programme; timings and proportion of online learning; and access to required learner resources for their programme.

- (3) Carlow College will provide email contacts of programme directors or course co-ordinators for learners who require specific programme information.

For more on Carlow College's approach to public information, see the [Marketing and Communications Policy](#).

4.3.8 Data Protection

Blended learning programmes are compliant with College [Data Protection Policy](#).

4.3.9 Learner Supports and Resources

Carlow College is committed to ensuring that learners on blended programmes have the same level of access of learning support and development through the Academic Resource Office equivalent to learners on programmes with equivalent volumes of learning delivered through other modes.

Carlow College provides support for learners on blended learning programmes with equivalent access to college support systems and academic resources, namely [Student Counselling Service](#), [Chaplaincy Services](#), [Student Health Service](#), [ARO Disability and Learning Support Service](#), [Learner Information and Retention Officer](#) (LIRO), [Careers Office](#), [IT Service](#) and [Library Service](#).

For further information, please see the [Quality Assurance Policy](#) (Section 4.7) or the [Blended Learning Handbook for Staff](#).

5. Roles and Responsibilities

The Office of the Registrar is responsible for the overall implementation of this policy. The Office of the Registrar is also responsible for training and awareness initiatives to support staff and learners in their satisfactory use of technologies in use in the delivery and completion of blended learning programmes and modules.

Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee are responsible for the upkeep and review of blended learning policies and procedures.

IT Department are responsible for the provision, implementation and support of all technology(s), current and in the future, that are required to deliver blended learning programmes and modules.

Student Services Function are responsible for the provision of access to learner supports in online and blended learning contexts.

6. Associated Documentation

- [*Blended Learning Handbook for Staff*](#)

7. Referenced Policies

The following policies pertain to the *Blended Learning Policy*:

- [*Academic Integrity and Plagiarism Policy*](#)
- [*Assessment of Learners Policy*](#)
- [*Assessment Re-Check, Review and Appeals Policy*](#)
- [*Critical Incident Policy*](#)
- [*Data Protection*](#) (includes all policies and associated documents)
- [*Information Security Framework*](#) (includes all policies and associated documents)
- [*Learner Admission, Progression and Recognition Policy*](#)
- [*Learner Disability Policy*](#)
- [*Learning and Teaching Policy*](#)
- [*Marking and Communications Policy*](#)
- [*Quality Assurance Policy*](#) (including [*appendices*](#))
- [*Recruitment and Selection Policy*](#)

This is not an exhaustive list of policies. All public policies can be found on the Carlow College website [Policies A-Z](#). All policies for staff can be found on the Staff Portal and all policies for learners can be found on the Student Portal.

8. Monitoring and Review

Blended learning programmes are subject to the *Quality Assurance Policy* for the monitoring and review of programmes. The Office of the Registrar will monitor the implementation of the policy. The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee will annually review the Policy.