Section 5S Blended Learning Policy

What is Blended learning?

Blended Learning: QQI refers to Garrison and Kanuka's definition of blended learning as "the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" (QQI 2018, p.3). QQI guidelines also state that *'blended learning will always involve face-to-face learning'*. In compliance with these core guidelines our Blended Learning programmes will consist of a range of proven integrated teaching and learning approaches which will include:

- Synchronous, collaborative virtual training
- Asynchronous learning resources and communication pathways
- Online assessment tools
- Learner supports and resources
- Traditional learning (face-to-face, tutorials, and work-based learning experiences)

The topic of the effectiveness or not of Blended Learning is a much-debated subject and one that we have considered extensively in the preparation of this BL policy.

Advantages & Disadvantages of Blended Learning

Advantages	Disadvantages
Flexibility - learners can study in their own time with the possibility of scheduling study around work and personal commitments	**Instructors must be highly skilled** in the use of educational technologies particularly if they have been conditioned to face-to-face learning in the past.
Flexibility in delivery (training provider) - class size, location, duration, etc	**Internet issues** can cause disruptions
Suitable for learners who are **geographically dispersed**	**Not all learners have access to the required technologies** which may leave some learners at a disadvantage
A broad range of learning methods and learning resources are used which will suit a variety of learning styles	**Engagement and relationship building** is more difficult to achieve - blended learners may not suit highly social individuals
Use of learning materials for reinforcement e.g. Videos, quizzes, resources repository may be very beneficial to some learners.	**Requires the discipline of self-directed learning** with a higher emphasis on work completed outside of session time
The pace of learning is set by the learner – some learners learn quicker than others	**Some activities are challenging to duplicate** online - this may require additional time spent preparing and developing new materials
Asynchronous communication - learners have controlled access to their tutor outside of course delivery time	VLE is not ideal for classes longer than three hours
Modern Technology – most adults are using their phone or tablet to perform everyday tasks such as banking, shopping, and entertainment – they are familiar with interactive technologies.	Learners who have little access to technology or who are IT illiterate will struggle with Blended Learning
The items marked in the right-hand column above will inform our Risk Assessment.	

Definitions

→ **Asynchronous activity:** "Learners engage with material online at different times and different locations that suit their personal needs. Examples of learning material or activities include pre-recorded videos, self-guided lessons or quizzes" (FESS 2020 p.8).

→ **eLearning Platform:** "This refers the any learning management system which facilitates the delivery of the course content. Can be used to deliver both online asynchronous and synchronous learning material/activities"(FESS 2020 p.8).

→ **Flipped Learning:** refers to "a pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter"(Flipped Learning.org https://is.gd/Hjylq9)

→ **Independent/Self Directed Learning:** Learners take responsibility for their own learning to complete course content and/or assessment.

→ **Offline content:** Content that is provided to facilitate learning outside of the directed and non-directed (using IT equipment) training time this might include on-the-job practice, work placement, job shadowing, or mentoring.

→ **Online Content:** Content/material that is available to learners on the eLearning platform and the internet. This can include text, images, animations, music, and videos (FESS 2020 p.8).

→ **Synchronous activity:** "Learners engage in learning at the same time but not the same location with activities such as a webinar or chat. Educators and learners engage in real-time" (FESS 2020 p.9).

→ **TEL:** Technology Enhanced Learning

→ **VLE:** a real-time e-learning experience where learners can interact with their tutor in the presence of their fellow learners. Learners can also interact with each other through chat, breakout sessions, and other interactive eLearning functions.

1. **Public Information:** We believe that it is important to instruct learners towards an understanding of the learning pathway that they are undertaking as the idea of 'online learning' has many interpretations. We commit to educating people through our public information channels on the different modes of online learning emphasising the importance for the learner of making the right choice to meet their needs. Our **Public information policy** is available in the **(Operations Manual Section 9A, 9D, 9J & 9K)**

Website Public Information: https://www.newlinkstraining.com/about/mission

The Moodle LMS

Moodle is an eLearning Management System (LMS) that gives instructors and learners the tools and technologies they need to teach and learn in a professional and secure online learning environment. Moodle comes from a background of Social Constructionist pedagogy, however, it can be used to support any style of teaching and learning. Moodle operates effectively with other systems for enhancement of functionality; for instance, Zoom can be embedded into the Moodle system so that learners have a one-stop sign-in option. Within the system there is a wide range of plugins that will be used to enhance the functionality of the system and the experience for the end-user (the learner).

These include:
→ **Courses and activities:** A Moodle course is a sequence of activities and resources grouped into sections.
→ **Users:** are anyone who uses the Moodle system. To participate in the course users need to be enrolled into the course with an assigned role either learners or tutors.
→ **Course enrolment**: gives the user the possibility to participate in the course as a learner or a tutor.
→ **User functionality:** roles assigned to users give them a set of capabilities in a given context e.g. tutor, learner, or moderator.
→ **User's capabilities:** a capability is a description of a particular Moodle feature. Capabilities are associated with roles.
→ **Context:** a context is a "space" in the Moodle, such as courses, activity modules, blocks, etc.
→ **Permissions:** A permission is a value that is assigned for a capability for a particular role e.g. allow or prevent.
→ **Additional facilities:** create and edit user profiles, groups and cohorts, enrolments, and access control.
→ **Activity and course completion:** activities such as quizzes, assessments, etc. to be marked complete when specified conditions are met.
→ **Navigation, settings, and configuration blocks:** provide easy access to view various sections of the Moodle site and includes:
  o **My home** - a personalised home page displaying links to the courses a user is associated with and activity information
  o **Site pages** - links to site pages and resources from the front page of Moodle
  o **My profile** - quick links allowing a user to view their profile, forums posts, blogs, and messages as well as manage their private files
  o **My courses** - lists and links to courses the user is associated with.
→ **Logs and statistics:** statistics graphs and tables show how many hits there have been on various parts of the Moodle site during selected time frames. Logs are activity reports. Logs are available at the site level and course level.

The Moodle eLearning Classroom Layout:

We have customised our Moodle eLearning platform to make resources accessible for learners to study remotely. We aim to ensure the Moodle eLearning platform is presented as user-friendly, informative, and easy-to-navigate. The homepage has headline sections at the top with breadcrumb tabs for easy forward and backward access to pages & resources. Moodle is a sophisticated system with multi-use functions that will ensure that learners can avail themselves of all the supports they need to complete their eLearning experience. Moodle is designed to be intuitive and user-friendly.

8Moodle Security (Accessing the Moodle Platform)

Learners and tutors will be added as users to www.academy.newlinkstraining.com to enable secure access to the Moodle portal. The Moodle system will generate a random password for each user who will be required to set their own password for subsequent access to the Moodle platform. New Links Training Solutions has no visibility of, or access to, user passwords once they are activated. Learners can reset their passwords at any time as needed. All other security-related information is outlined described in the IT and Systems usage policy in **Section 8 of the Operations Manual**.

Use of Zoom, Access & Security

NLTS uses the recommended best practice in the setup and use of Zoom for our VLE and will continue to apply security updates as recommended by Zoom as the application is updated in the future.

The following recommended security features have been applied:

- All participants must register before joining a session
- All meetings are set up with a password
- Random ID's are allocated to each session
- Only authenticated users can join a session
- The host controls the Chat and Screen Sharing Functions to ensure that participants can chat
- The host can remove users and report users to Zoom
- Compliance/GDPR instructions are issued to all users in advance of training

Learners will receive an individual email in advance of the programme start date with details of the Zoom meeting. All emails contain a link to the session and (depending on the programme) they may also have additional link(s) to our Moodle site. The following features have been updated by Zoom recently which improves the Zoom environment from an operational and security perspective.

Technical Support

A systems communications coordinator will be appointed to oversee the day-to-day operations of teaching and learning activities and IT infrastructure. This role will encompass IT, QA, administration, and customer support.

Tutors: receive in-depth training on the system and will have access to a **course monitor** during all live training sessions. Outside of live sessions, tutors can access the **systems communications coordinator or other designated support** via mobile phone.

Learners: technical support on the Moodle Application is available to learners by contacting tutorinfo@newlinkstraining.com or by sending an internal communication using the Moodle Forum. Queries are responded to within 12 hours based on a 5-day working week.

Copyright and Intellectual Property Rights

Moodle is a web application written in PHP. Moodle is open source. Copyright is owned by individual contributors, not assigned to a single entity.

All legal and regulatory obligations including Intellectual property, copyright and GDPR, and aligned data protection are adhered to.

The Blended Learning Journey (Learner)

The process diagram below shows the milestones in the learner journey with particular emphasis on the type of supports the learner is likely to benefit from while they are studying their blended learning module. A similar type chart will be used for each blended learning module uploaded on Moodle – this may take the form of an animated short video tutorial.
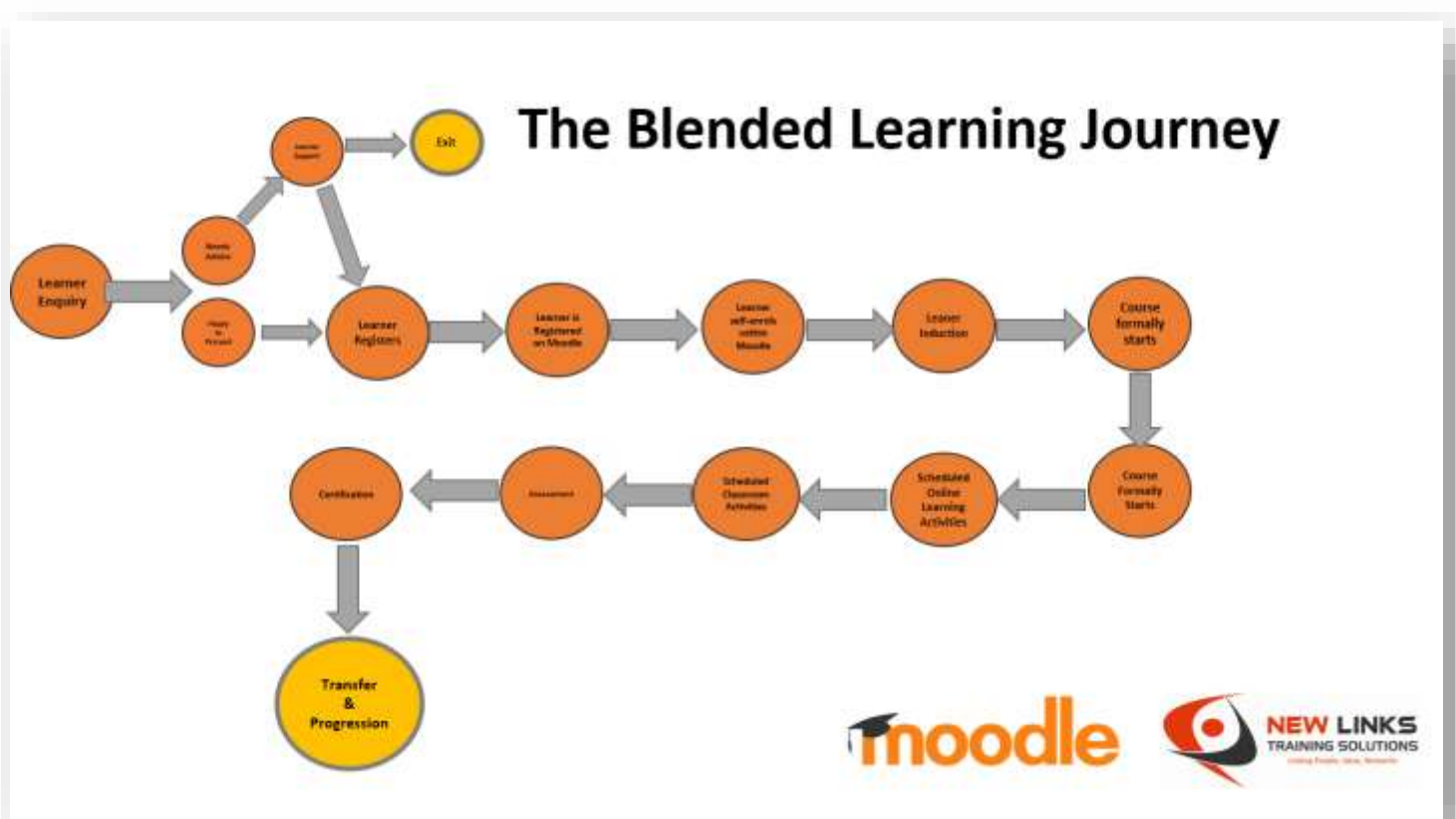
Learner and Faculty Support

The Blended learning environment is different from a face-to-face classroom and as it is a new and emerging part of the business requires a significant level of monitoring and support. Each element must be closely monitored and controlled to ensure that the environment presents the learner with the same opportunities to succeed as they would in a face-to-face setting.

For Learners:

- Clear and unambiguous instructions are given to learners in advance of signing up for or at commencement of training.
- An opportunity for learners to 'try out' the Moodle interface, no-commitment and free of charge before training commences. This presents an opportunity for the learner to meet with staff and personalise an experience that might otherwise appear distant and detached.
- An opportunity to speak to a trainer or advisor during the referral/sign-up stage.
- Opening Induction presented to learners on commencement of each programme of learning and available via video tutorial for review throughout the course.
- VLE Communication channels clearly outlined to learners e.g. chat function, breakout rooms, etc
- All course forms & instructions available for download on the Moodle interface.
- Video Tutorials for learners – currently Induction, completing QQI assessments, and plagiarism. We will increase the number of video tutorials in line with Blended Learning Course Development.
- Health & Safety measures are explained to learners at the commencement of each live session.
- GDPR measures are explained to learners at the commencement of each live session.

If you need information on any aspect of Blended Learning please speak to your tutor or contact our customer service at tutorinfo@newlinkstraining.com

For Tutors:

- The tutor handbook **(Operations Manual Section 5A)** has been updated and is kept up to date with all relevant instructions for tutors
- Induction & Training on the use of Moodle.
- Induction & Training on the use of Zoom.
- Induction & Training on any enhancements to the QA system resulting from the rollout of Blended Learning.
- Ongoing training as outlined in the contingency plan above page 14.
- Introduction of a Work from home policy **(Operations Manual Section 5R).**
- An IT support person available to support troubleshooting issues (this also applies to learners)
- A monitor on hand to support both tutor and learners in the development phase of each BL programme
- Health & Safety measures explained and updates communicated.
- GDPR measures explained and updates communicated.

- Work from home policy signed off and approved **(Operations Manual Section 5R).**

- Analysis of the data generated from VLE course delivery will be used for the enhancement of eLearning activities moving forward.

- Use of proven and tested technologies to support the Blended Learning activities

- Security measures applied, tested, and communicated to tutors/learners

- Health & Safety measures explained to learners at the commencement of each session

- Health & Safety measures explained to tutors during the induction phase.

- GDPR measures are explained to learners at the commencement of each live session.

- GDPR are measures explained to tutors during the induction phase **(Operations Manual Section 4Q & 8A).**

If you need information on any aspect of Blended Learning please speak to any member of the quality team.