

LMETB Blended Learning Guidelines

Arna chomhchistiú ag Rialtas na hÉireann agus ag an Aontas Eorpach

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Rialtas na hÉireann
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LMETB Blended Learning Guidelines

Section 1 - Introduction

The LMETB Blended Learning Guidelines are designed to accompany the LMETB Blended Learning Policy document. The Guidelines provide a more detailed look at blended learning and how it might be activated across LMETB Further Education and Training.

The world of education and training has undergone significant changes since March 2020, when Covid-19 necessitated the introduction of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) and Learning¹. The move to ERT was a *“temporary shift in the delivery of education to an alternative delivery model in which all teaching is conducted online”*. While there were challenges for some learners and staff in moving to this new online model, there were also positives in terms of greater flexibility and accessibility for learners. As we now move leave ERT behind, we move to the period After Covid or AC (see figure 1 below) where we expect to see an increased use of online learning spaces and approaches across FET. Digital technologies will play a key role in making this happen.

BC- DC - AC

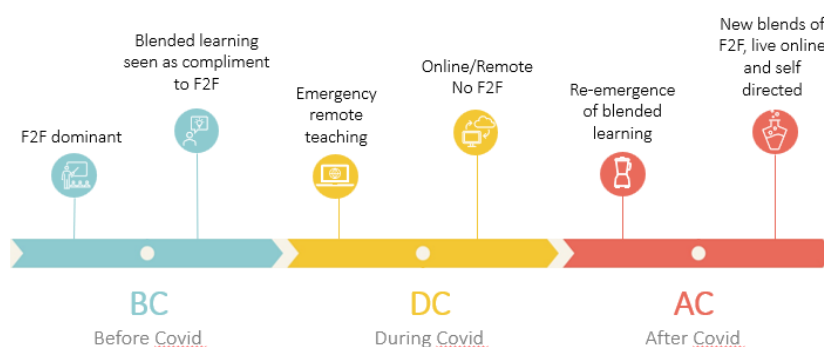


Figure 1, Timeline for Blended Learning

The most recent SOLAS strategy for FET, Future FET: Transforming Learning², recognises that the learning is evolving and that there is now a requirement for more flexible and convenient forms of learning that are supported at all times by technology. The strategy

¹

[https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2022.921332/full#:~:text=Emergency%20remote%20teaching%20is%20a,et%20al.%2C%202020\).](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2022.921332/full#:~:text=Emergency%20remote%20teaching%20is%20a,et%20al.%2C%202020).)

² https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf

makes multiple references to expanding access to education and training and there is a recognition that digital technology will play a role in this regard. At the launch of the strategy the SOLAS CEO, Andrew Brownlee, stated that

“Progression levels through FET will increase strongly, with pathways from core skills courses and community education available to all who wish to pursue them. A digitally transformed FET system will offer a large portfolio of flexible, online and blended opportunities³.”

Therefore, digital transformation is a core aspect of the strategy, and it outlines three rationales underpinning this strategic direction:

- Making better use of digital technology for teaching and learning
- Developing relevant digital competences and skills for digital society
- Improving educational systems through better data and analysis

The strategy recognises that digital technology is part of our lives today and that it played a key role during Covid-19 to enable education and training activities to continue. The FET sector has long recognised the potential of digital technology to transform teaching, learning and assessment practices⁴ and all ETBs invested heavily in developing the digital competences of their staff so they can effectively use these technologies to support all aspects of their work. This is an ongoing journey, one that was further endorsed in the Future FET: Transforming Learning Update⁵ from SOLAS in 2021. There is a recognition that digital technology can transform many aspects of education and in particular how learners access courses and programmes in the future. The strategy references both fully online and blended courses as possible modes of education and training that should be developed to meet the needs of the sector over the coming decade. Therefore, it is important for ETBs to plan and design for the rollout of such new modes of education and training and in this policy document we will:

- Define what Blended Learning might look like across LMETB
- Set out which kinds of blends will require approval from the Quality Unit

The purpose of this policy document is to share our vision and expectations of blended learning with staff and learners so as to encourage LMETB staff to continue to innovatively meet the ever-expanding needs of our learners.

³ <https://www.solas.ie/news-media/new-strategy-aims-to-expand-role-of-further-education-and-training/>

⁴ https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/320655fc81/tel_strategy.pdf

⁵ https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/8bfe52a969/futurefet_ezine.pdf

Defining Blended Learning

Blended Learning is not a new mode of learning, and it has been in existence now for well over 20 years. Before Covid-19, BC, there were numerous examples of blended learning across the PLC sector and apprenticeships and there is now an expectation that such modes of education and training will become even more popular.

What does blended learning look like to you? 3 words



Figure 1, LMETB staff descriptors for blended learning

When LMETB staff were asked to share 3 words to capture what blended learning meant to them, the most common response was flexible. Therefore, there is an expectation that blended learning should provide greater flexibility to staff and learners and this can manifest itself in many different ways.

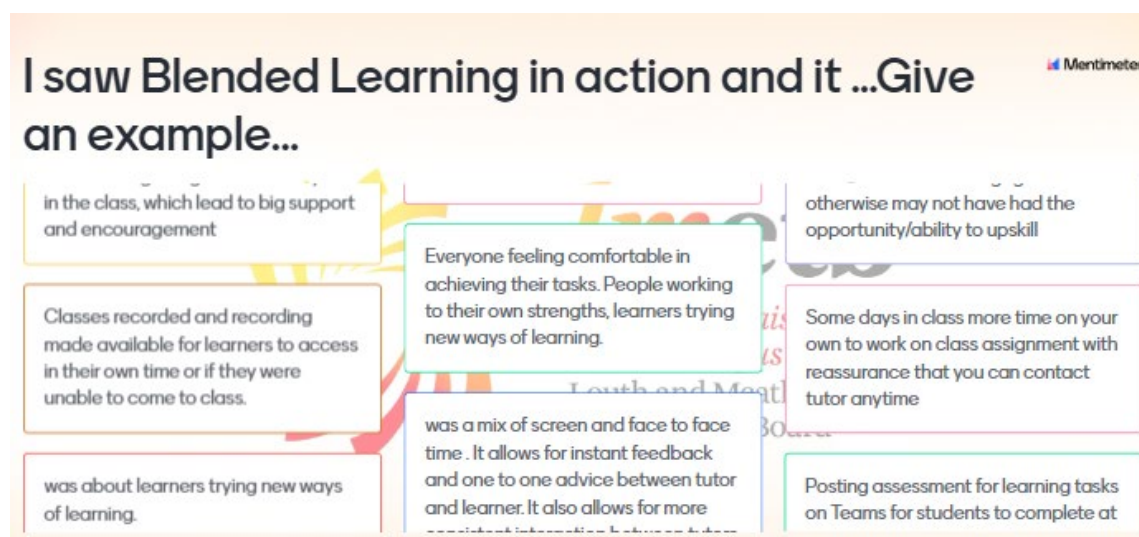


Figure 2, What blended learning looks like in action across LMETB

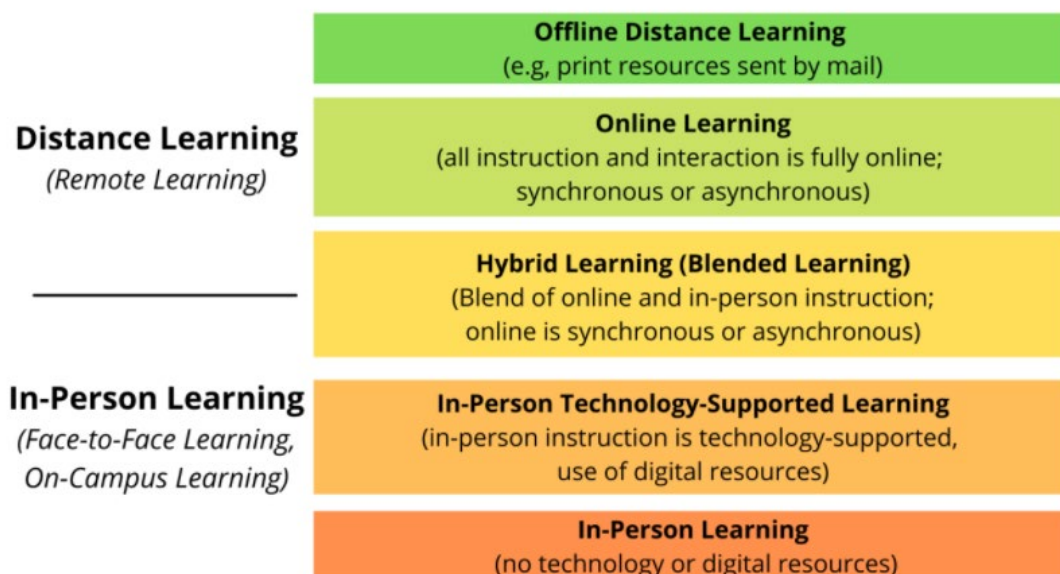
While staff and learners engaged primarily in Emergency Remote Teaching during Covid there are already examples of blended learning across LMETB. Staff shared some examples of these flexible approaches during a recent workshop, see an excerpt in figure 2. These examples showed learners engaged with their course material, their educators and their fellow learners in new ways.

Post Covid-19 there is now a recognition across all areas of education and training that we have more choices in terms of where we learn and how we learn⁶. Figure 3 below captures a spectrum of learning modes, which ranges from the traditional in-person learning spaces, typically a classroom or a workshop, where there is no use of digital technology to a fully online distance learning space, where all teaching, learning and assessment is supported by digital technology (i.e., online learning). It should be noted that it concludes with the traditional offline correspondence course where learners work on their own without any support from digital. The diagram captures two worlds, the in-person learning world where teachers and learners meet together in-person and the online world, where teachers and learners meet and interact using an ever-expanding range of digital technology. At its extremities these two worlds don't use any digital technologies, but such spaces are becoming less and less popular.

In the middle there is an area where these two worlds meet and overlap, and this space is typically referred to as blended or hybrid learning.

⁶ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-covid-19-has-highlighted-need-stronger-vet-sector-ron-maxwell>

The Modes of Learning Spectrum



From Johnson, N. (2021)

Figure 3, Modes of Learning Spectrum⁷

This space is typically known as blended learning and has recently been defined as “a blend of online and in-person instruction (online instruction is synchronous or asynchronous)”⁸. Some have described it as being the best of both worlds, while others, such as QQI, use older definitions which state that “blended learning is the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” from Garrison and Kanuka from 2004⁹.

While the term blended learning (BL) will probably never get a standard definition, it is commonly understood as the combination of something traditional (i.e., the in-person instruction) and something new (i.e. The online/virtual places, digital course materials, communication tools, and pedagogies). Blending these two worlds, the in-person and the online, allows FET educators to design different blends depending on their context (who and what they are teaching), their levels of digital competences and those of their learners. Ultimately, it provides greater choice to learners in terms of where they learn, how they learn and when they learn.

⁷ <https://www.tonybates.ca/2022/03/24/defining-quality-and-online-learning/>

⁸ <https://olj.onlinelearningconsortium.org/index.php/olj/article/view/3565>

⁹ [https://pressbooks.pub/learningenvironmentsdesign/chapter/garrison-kanuka-blended-learning-uncovering-its-transformative-potential-in-higher-education/#:~:text=The%20authors%20define%20blended%20learning,96\).](https://pressbooks.pub/learningenvironmentsdesign/chapter/garrison-kanuka-blended-learning-uncovering-its-transformative-potential-in-higher-education/#:~:text=The%20authors%20define%20blended%20learning,96).)

The Covid-19 pandemic was a period of tremendous change for staff and learners across all levels of education and training, yet it was also an extremely innovative time where new practices emerged. The research on this period found that:

- Many teachers developed deeper connections with certain learner types, particularly those quieter learners
- Many staff and learners welcomed the flexibility around when, where and how they learned
- Many learners were required to take greater ownership of their learning
- New modes of learning, such as blended learning, became popular with learners
- There was a renewed use of formative assessment practices, supported by digital technologies

There is evidence from this time period that many learners had access to more inclusive forms of education¹⁰ and there is now a desire and a vision from SOLAS to transform teaching, learning and assessment practices After Covid, AC. There is an expectation that learners will have more opportunities to engage in learning, both accredited and non-accredited, and that digital technologies will enable this to happen. Ultimately learners will have greater choice in terms of how they access and engage with FET learning in this period and blended learning will be to the fore.

¹⁰ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/08f98a36-c054-11ec-b6f4-01aa75ed71a1>

Section 2 Blended Learning – What is it in LMETB

Policy Context

The SOLAS Future FET: Transforming Learning strategy has digital transformation as one of its four key enabling themes and stated that its first area of focus would be:

“Comprehensive and accessible digital solutions ought to be devised to improve learner access for all potential FET learners in order to facilitate smart choices and to articulate clearer learning pathways and employment/progression outcomes¹¹”

Furthermore, an evaluation of Post Leaving Cert (PLC) programme provision, conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), recommends that providers of PLC programmes should also be required to offer more flexibility to learners by offering these programmes in non-traditional ways e.g., via online platforms¹². So, there is a recognition at a national level of the need to offer alternative flexible forms of learning supported by digital technology.

At EU level the Digital Education Action Plan¹³ also recognises the potential of digital technology to transform education and training and it has a specific action on blended learning. While the action for blended learning is specific to the schools’ sector, the Commission recognises the need to offer alternative modes of learning to adult learners.

What the research says about blended learning

When we think of blended learning, we should consider the following questions:

- **Where** learning takes place (the physical and online/virtual spaces)
- **How** learning takes place (the range of pedagogical approaches taken)
- **What** technologies or tools are used to support learning (the digital tools and resources required)
- **Who** are the learners (consideration of their context and their digital competences)

Garrison and Kanuka defined blended learning as the “thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” and this needs to be at the forefront of our minds when designing blended learning approaches. Blended Learning is ultimately about making choices in relation to the questions outlined above and there is no-one-size-fits all and we have freedom to create blends that work for our learners.

¹¹ https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf

¹² <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/RS61.pdf>

¹³ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/about/digital-education-action-plan>

Alammary et al., suggest that educators and learning organisations should “*develop their own meaning of the term (blended learning) within the context of their course or institution*”¹⁴ (p. 443). They should consider how they will blend:

- **their instructional methods** (such as lectures, discussion groups, workshops, skills demonstrations etc.)
- **where learning takes place** (such as in-centre, live online or self-directed learning at home or elsewhere)
- **what technologies** that facilitate teaching, learning and assessment practices (such as digital technologies, books and other media).

When considering Blended Learning, we should take a holistic approach and Alammary et al. have defined **3 levels** that can help us in ensuring that all staff and learners can engage in this inclusive form of learning.

Using such a model allows an ETB to offer a range of blended learning offerings:

1. **Low-impact blend:** adding extra activities to an existing course/programme
 - Where an instructor uses a Kahoot Quiz during class, or they ask learners to watch a video of a skills demonstration on their phone during/after the in-person class.
2. **Medium-impact blend:** replacing activities in an existing course/programme
 - Educator records a presentation in advance of the face-to-face session and learners access it online via their learning management system (LMS). The face-to-face classroom session focuses more on active learning and less on content sharing. (The Flipped Classroom Model)
3. **High-impact blend:** replacing some in-person sessions (traditional face-to-face) with live synchronous online sessions.
 - The ETB designs or redesigns an existing course/programme so that it has a blend of in-person and online timetabled synchronous online sessions. Learners are required to access some part(s) of the programme live online using Teams. Such a programme is accredited as a BL course/ programme by LMETB.

The *low-impact blend* implies that it has a *low-impact* on the workload of the educator. They are not transforming their programme in any major way other than embedding digital technologies into their classroom practice in a thoughtful way so as to enhance student learning. In the example above they are using a Kahoot Quiz to support formative

¹⁴ <https://ajet.org.au/index.php/AJET/article/view/693>

assessment practices with their learners and such blends would not require the approval of the QA team. Such an approach would be viewed as good teaching.

The *medium-impact blend* has only a *medium impact* on the workload of the educator. Here they may decide to share some materials with learners in advance/or after the in-person session and they may source these online or they may develop them themselves. The idea here is that learners engage with the content online in advance of/after the face-to-face class session. The rationale for such an approach is to free up time in the traditional classroom space for more active learning approaches and to allow the educator work with learners who require additional support or to engage in more discussion. This approach is often referred to as the flipped classroom approach or the ‘wrap around’ approach¹⁵, see figure 3, and it is extremely popular in FET and in other settings. This approach is also often viewed as good teaching and would not require the approval of the QA team. Such an approach is underpinned by active teaching and learning approaches and endeavours to actively engage the learners in their learning.

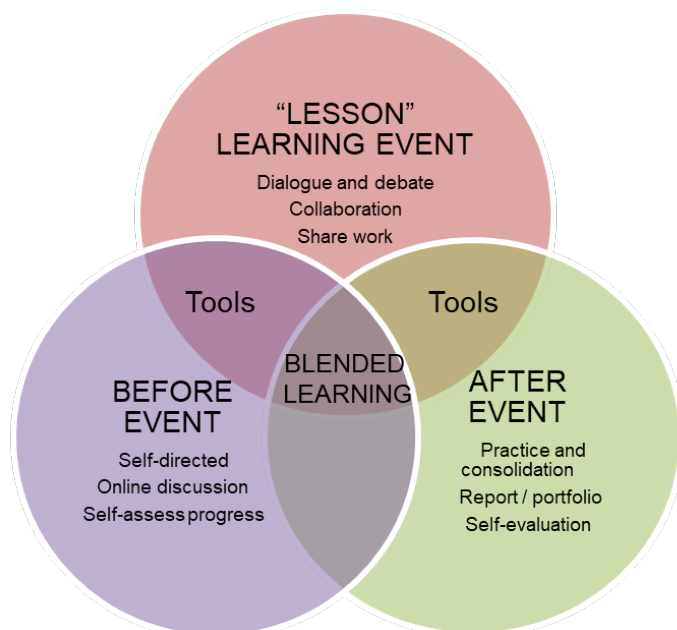


Figure 4, The Flipped Classroom Model

The **high-impact blend** has the potential to **significantly increase** the workload of the educator and the ETB. Typically, such an approach sees some in-person classroom teaching activities replaced by online synchronous sessions, where the educator and learners are online simultaneously, and this is explicitly captured in the timetable. Such an approach should also include asynchronous learning activities, where learners access learning material in their own time, and these are typically located on a virtual learning platform such as

¹⁵ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-responds-to-blended-learning-review/>

Moodle. The high-impact blend **does** require significant planning and support and thus will need **the approval of the QA team**, as it significantly alters the teaching and learning experiences for both staff and learners.

The advantage of taking a holistic approach to BL is that all staff and learners within LMETB can participate and it is inclusive in that it provides choices in terms for the learners in terms of **how**, **where** and **when** they learn. BL allows the educator to decide what approaches will work best in their particular contexts by bearing in mind issues such as the:

- Educators' digital competence
- Learners' digital competence
- Programme content and assessment requirements
- Digital infrastructure available to them
- The level of the programme

Blended Learning in LMETB

Staff in LMETB are already engaged in these 3 forms of blended learning. Staff see merit in such approaches, as captured in a recent focus group, in terms of:

- Providing more flexible access to course content through recordings etc. on a 24/7 basis
- Learners having greater control over their learning, and it forces them to take greater responsibility for when, where and how they learn
- Offering more opportunities for differentiation of learning
- Expanding the reach of courses to a larger learner cohort, within and outside the ETB
- Reducing travel time and costs

Furthermore, educators identified a range of existing blends that are already in place and the following examples capture what these look like.

Low Impact Blends

Digital Technology in a Literacy Class

Learners in a literacy group use Book Creator to create their own digital publications. Learners have the option of writing text or adding pictures and voice notes to create their books. This makes it particularly useful for classes with differing levels of literacy. In this context learners are developing their own digital competences and using digital technology to create new digital creations that they can share digitally with their teacher and the world beyond the classroom.

Medium Impact Blend

Flipped Classroom

The teacher uses a Flipped Classroom approach and shares materials with learners before class through Moodle or Teams. Learners engage with the content in advance of the live in-person class and class time is used for active learning activities, such as discussing material, working on problems and answering questions.

High-Impact Blend¹⁶

Computerised Payroll Evening Course (Regional Skills and Training Centre RSTC)

This course is delivered with a mix of live online classes and Face-to-Face workshops. The theoretical course content is delivered during synchronous online sessions through Microsoft Teams and learners have the opportunity to further revisit these materials, in their own time, on Moodle (asynchronous). The practical elements of the course are delivered in-person along with all the assessments. The face-to-face interaction with other peers is an important aspect of the course, as is the ability for the teacher to see first-hand if someone needs extra support.

The schedule for the blended learning courses varies, with some classes beginning with 2-3 weeks of online theory delivery before transitioning to in-person workshops for the remainder of the course. Other classes may feature one online session per week throughout the duration of the course. The delivery method for each class will be communicated in advance.

Industrial Electrical Systems (Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre of Excellence AMTCE)

This five-day course is blended, with one day dedicated to online learning and the remaining four days delivered in a classroom and workshop setting.

The online component of the course provides both self-directed study time and live synchronous online classes facilitated through a Learning Management System. Learners have access to a variety of online resources, including quizzes and knowledge checks, to enhance their understanding of the course material.

The remaining four days of the course are delivered in a classroom and workshop setting, with a focus on practical learning and assessments.

¹⁶ We have provided 2 examples as this form of blended learning often raises the most issues for ETB staff. These examples showcase the blend of in-person and synchronous online learning in two distinctive blends.

The examples above have a mix of live online and in-person timetabled sessions that educators and learners attend. Such high-impact approaches need to be carefully planned and supported. The research shows that learners need to be clear on the format of the course, in terms of the timetable, and the ETB's expectations in relation to attendance and engagement with the course materials. The blend ideally should consider which elements are best covered online and in-person and this should dictate the blend.

The Need to Plan and Support High-Impact Blends

Staff see great potential to offer such blends and here are some of the possibilities they envisage that:

- For example, BL could have huge potential for apprenticeship programmes, with theory being delivered online and the practical sessions taking place in centre. It was noted that the examinations for these programmes are administered by SOLAS and this provides LMETB flexibility around how they deliver the content.
- Such approaches don't require drastic changes for staff and learners, rather the changes are subtle and evolutionary
- BL ultimately depends very much on the context – the programme/material in question. Therefore, there is a need to decide on a programme-by-programme basis to identify the best approach that would work for a blended course or programme.
- BL is also ideal for the delivery of modules like Safe pass/ First Aid and many ETBs are already engaging in such practices.
- There is scope to use resources, like virtual tours, to enhance and widen the learning resources used by instructors and learners.

Recent research highlights the need for additional supports for staff and learners in implementing such approaches¹⁷. It needs to consider issues such as pedagogical and IT support, alongside appropriate class sizes and the nature of the teaching and learning experiences that are envisaged. Typically, the activation of such blends takes some time as there is a need for a planned approach to the design and activation phases.

Furthermore, blended learning supports a range of assessment formats. Some courses may decide to opt for continual assessment and learners can submit their assignments, via Moodle or Teams, as required during the academic year. Courses that require a summative

¹⁷ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-responds-to-blended-learning-review/>

examination or a skills demonstration will be required to complete these in-person and they cannot be completed online.

The Low and Medium Impact Blends are examples of good teaching, which offer learners more inclusive ways to learn, and will allow all staff and learners to participate in blended learning approaches. There is a growing belief that staff should engage in the low and medium blends before attempting the high-impact blends. The high-impact blend will require approval from LMETB before a provider can offer such a mode of learning to their learners, as it needs careful consideration from a QA perspective.

Section 3: Transitioning to Blended Programme Delivery - Quality Assurance Procedures Overview

When considering whether to offer a course or programme as a high impact blend, it is important to consider the following.

Step 1: Carefully Consider **Why** the Programme Should be Blended

Centres will need to engage in a formal process to change the mode of delivery from a traditional in-person mode to that of a high-impact blend, where a portion of the timetabled course is delivered live online (synchronous). The first question all centres/providers need to consider is:

- **Why** should the programme be blended?

There should be a strong rationale for this decision outlining why such a change is necessary and citing evidence to support their decision. This might include requests from learners, employers or other stakeholders to develop a high-impact blend that provides greater flexibility to learners in terms of where, when and how they learn.

Staff stressed the importance of:

- Ensuring real buy-in by all in LMETB so as to ensure BL programmes are successful
- Ensuring that the purpose for implementing change is clear and rationalised.
Changes should not be implemented just because the technology is there. There needs to be clear reasons for how an entire programme or elements of existing programmes could be enhanced by taking a blended approach.

Thus, staff are keen to take an evidenced based approach to blended learning and to learn from previous and future practices in this area. However, once a decision has been made to transform a programme or to create a new programme then the centre engages in the following application process.

Step 2: Application to change to the mode of delivery for a programme i.e., change to blended delivery will be required. Centres will apply for approval through the Programme Approval Request form (PR1. The form will capture the required information needed to make a decision on whether to approve the centre or not.

Approvals are processed in the following way:

1. All sections of the application form must be completed (where applicable) with full and accurate details in all relevant fields. Insufficient detail in the application may render it void for processing.
2. Applications along with feedback (where applicable) will be provided to Programme Development Review and Evaluation (PDRE) Committee, who are consulted on applications.
4. The PDRE will consider all contributions and make a decision on each application.
5. Decisions of Approved/Declined Applications will be communicated to All Co-ordinators/Managers.
6. Decisions can be appealed to the FET Director, up to twenty days from issue of decisions from QA to all centres. A letter of appeal address the FET Director should set out the grounds for the appeal which include:
 - i. Fair procedures were not applied
 - ii. The application of the criteria for making the decision was not applied correctly.

Step 3: Decisions: an application to convert a programme to blended delivery will be decided against the following criteria:

- Whether sufficient information has been provided to consider the request – all relevant sections must be completed including additional resources and costing
- The suitability of the course and modules proposed for blended delivery to include but not limited to award level, learner profile, vocational area and demand
- The benefit of the mode change to blended learning to the learners
- Extent of course to move to blended. This criterion will be reviewed as capacity is built up within the system, including I.T. and pedagogical support.
- The capacity and capability of the centre to deliver via a high-impact blended learning programme
- The degree of consistency with the strategic aims of LMETB
- Agreement to engage in LMETB preparation stage

In considering the above, LMETB may seek expert external advice as part of assessing applications for approval. A new course may be approved and restricted to the traditional delivery mode

Step 4: Conditions of Approval: **Preliminary approval may be given under the new course approval process, however, final approval to move to a blended mode of programme delivery does not occur until the preparation stage is successfully completed.** The review and evaluation procedures are conducted by LMETB and the relevant centres.

Step 5: Preparation Stage. The following must occur as part of the preparation phase:

Once it has been decided to offer an existing or new programme as a high impact blend it is important to ensure that the Centre takes a holistic approach in redesigning the programme. A team needs to be assembled to ensure that the necessary supports are in place to support staff to design a programme that supports the principles of good, blended learning.

When designing such programmes careful consideration needs to be given to how the teaching, learning and assessment experiences in both modalities, in-person and online, will complement each other. All too often organisations only think of the online element, but it is important to equally consider what kinds of experiences will take place in the traditional classroom/workshop settings. Such discussions should take place as part of the design process where, at a minimum the following people and issues are considered:

- Centre/Programme/Service Leadership
- Teaching, learning and assessment staff
- Digital Content for the programme
- Representative from IT services
- Professional development for staff and learners
- Representative from the QA Team

This team can be quite nimble, but they will lead the development and ensure that quality experiences will be at the heart of the blend.

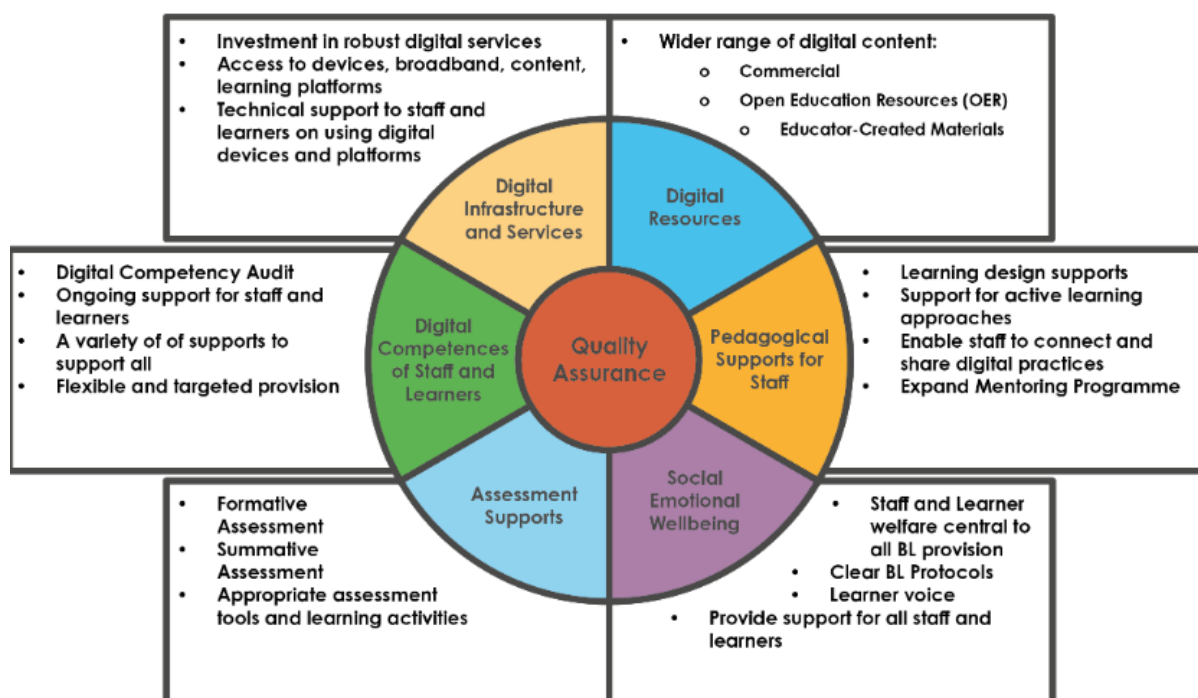


Figure 5, Holistic Approach to Blended Learning

Such a holistic approach, to the design and activation of a blended learning programme, will ensure that the programme is planned and structured to consider and address all the key elements of a quality blended learning programme.

During the recent focus group staff stressed the need to provide a range of supports to enable staff and learners to experience high-quality blended learning experiences. They identified issues such as:

- Improving staff and learner digital competences
- Ensuring the reliability and resourcing of the LMS platform (i.e., Teams and Moodle) for BL
- Access to timely technical and pedagogical supports
- Access to digital resources (i.e., suitable digital content)

LMETB has suggested that each centre should have the following structures/supports in place when embarking on redesigning or designing a new high-impact blended learning programme:

- a. Establish a TEL Steering Committee
- b. VLE and relevant resources in place
- c. Member of management with responsibility for operational side
- d. Compliance with legal or statutory obligations appropriate to blended learning contexts be ensured (e.g., child protection, health & safety, equality, intellectual property/copyright, licencing issues, GDPR, Protection of Enrolled Learners (PEL), professional or statutory body requirements, local regulatory considerations).
- e. Appoint a TEL Link Person(s).
- f. Plan for conversion of modules (for face-to-face and e-learning/remote delivery) and course plans with timetables for blended course
- g. Multi-stage Training Plans for Teachers – initial and to introduce new TEL tools during the course in staged manner
- h. Multi-stage Induction Plans for Learners – initial and for the introduction of new TEL tools during the course in a staged manner

4. Centre Level Procedures including Monitoring, Review and Evaluation Procedures

The preparation stage prepares centres to operate the standard operational procedures for blended delivery. These procedures include review and monitoring mechanisms through the centre TEL Steering Committee and may include other LMETB TEL experts and corporate level staff e.g., LMETB TEL Officer.

Ensuring a Holistic Approach

Tony Bates, a leader in online learning has stated that,

“Let me say from the start though that I believe any of the modes of teaching can be done well, provided that the right conditions are met, i.e., they meet quality standards¹⁸”

This statement refers to the range of modes of teaching that are now open to us in LMETB today and in particular new online modes, that previously were beyond our reach. Digital technologies are constantly evolving and opening up new spaces and ways to teach, to learn and to assess. LMETB is keen to expand access and transform FET opportunities across our ETB and beyond. We see blended learning as being a key element of this transformational process and it will open up a range of new more flexible and inclusive education and training experiences to our learners.

¹⁸ <https://www.tonybates.ca/2022/03/24/defining-quality-and-online-learning/>