# Online Learning Framework v1

## The Open College

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| **Document Version** | 1.0 |
| **Owner** | QA Office |
| **Approved By** | Academic Board |
| **Effective Date** | 2025-05-01 |
| **Next Review Date** | 2026-05-01 |
| **Status** | **Approved** |

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Figure 1: A close up of a sign Description automatically generated

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# 2   Document Control

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1.0
Responsibility
Leadership Team
Review Cycle
Yearly
Next Review
This policy is due for review upon publication of updated QQI QA guidelines in 2025/2026

## 2.1   Record of Revisions

| Version | Date | Description | Approved by |
|---------|------|-------------|-------------|
| 1.0 | May 2025 | Initial Version | AB |

**Online Learning Framework**

# 3   1. Purpose and Scope:

This Online Learning Framework sets out The Open College's strategic model for the design, delivery, and evaluation of fully online learning. It articulates the core principles

that underpin our digital-first teaching approach and provides a structural reference point for academic planning, programme development, and quality assurance.

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Teaching
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Approach

Quality
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framework ensures alignment with the College's Strategic Plan (2024–2026), QQI's Statutory QA Guidelines for Blended and Fully Online Programmes (2023), and broader national expectations for high-quality digital education.

It applies to all QQI-accredited programmes delivered in whole or in part through online modes and is intended for use by academic staff, programme developers, support services, and institutional governance bodies.

This framework does not replace procedural documents or policy detail but sits above them - providing a unified conceptual basis for their development and implementation.

# 4    2. Teaching and Learning Approach

At The Open College, our teaching and learning approach is grounded in learner-centred, inclusive, and evidence-informed principles, purposefully designed for fully online delivery. This section outlines the core strategies that shape our digital pedagogy, drawing from established theory while responding to the needs of our diverse, predominantly adult learner population.

We view learning not as the passive transmission of information, but as an active, constructive, and socially engaged process.

This philosophy informs the design of all modules and guides how tutors support, facilitate, and assess learning across the college. In a digital-first environment, effective teaching must be intentional, structured, and adaptive - using technology not as a substitute for face-to-face instruction, but as a powerful enabler of high-quality learning.

## 4.1    2.1 Theoretical Foundations

Our teaching model is underpinned by a blend of complementary educational theories particularly suited to online, adult, and professional learners:

- **Constructivism** (Piaget, Vygotsky): Learners actively build knowledge through meaningful engagement with content and the application of concepts to real-world contexts. Our modules support this through scaffolded tasks, self-paced learning, and structured opportunities for reflection.

- **Social Constructivism** (Vygotsky): While both Piaget and Vygotsky are central to constructivist thinking, Vygotsky's emphasis on the social nature of learning warrants distinct attention. We encourage peer learning through discussion forums, live workshops, and collaborative activities. Tutors facilitate knowledge co-construction, drawing on the Zone of Proximal Development to extend learners' thinking.

- **Connectivism** (Siemens, Downes): In a digital age, learning happens across networks - of people, resources, and platforms. We reflect this by integrating curated external content, encouraging contributions to forums and shared workspaces, and supporting the development of digital literacies essential for networked learning.

- **Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle**: Our teaching strategies include opportunities for learners to engage in concrete experience, reflect on those experiences, draw out key principles, and apply them in new contexts. Reflective tasks, formative feedback, and applied assessments bring this cycle to life.

- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**: Accessibility and inclusion are embedded from the outset, not bolted on later. UDL informs our design of content, interaction, and assessment – ensuring, where possible, multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression to support the widest possible range of learners.

This theoretical foundation offers a coherent rationale for our teaching practices while allowing flexibility for programmes and tutors to apply these principles in context-specific ways.

## 4.2   2.2 Core Principles of Practice

Our online learning model is built around seven core principles:

1. **Structured Flexibility**
   All modules follow a consistent weekly structure in Moodle, using a chunked format that includes learning outcomes, core content, activities, and reflective prompts. This gives learners autonomy in how and when they engage, while maintaining a clear pedagogical rhythm that supports motivation and retention.

2. **Tutor Presence and Facilitation**
   Tutors are not passive observers, and their role extends beyond subject expertise. They are active facilitators who guide learners through the material, prompt critical thinking, and encourage interaction. This includes posting weekly announcements, engaging in forums, and offering timely, constructive feedback.

3. **Synchronous Engagement as Core Practice**
   While our programmes are fully online, synchronous workshops remain a required part of the learning experience. Delivered via BigBlueButton or Microsoft Teams, these sessions are designed for real-time discussion, peer interaction, and the practical application of learning.

   They foster community, accountability, and are scheduled to support broad participation -including learners with professional, family, or geographic constraints.

4. **Active and Reflective Learning**
   Learners engage through forums, quizzes, group tasks, and applied activities. Reflection is embedded throughout to help students connect new knowledge to prior experience and their professional context. Many assessments include reflective components to support deeper understanding and personal development.

5. **Formative Feedback as Learning Tool**
   Tutors provide formative feedback throughout each module, particularly on key activities and early drafts. This helps learners identify gaps, deepen their understanding, and build confidence. Feedback is often dialogic - shared as part of an ongoing conversation rather than a single event - and may be delivered in text, audio, or video format.

6. **Evidence-Informed Teaching Methods**
   Teaching teams draw on research in adult education, digital pedagogy, and subject-specific practice. Approaches such as flipped learning, problem-based learning, and case-based teaching are adapted for online delivery, ensuring that content is not just accessible, but meaningfully structured for deep learning.

7. **Technology as Enabler, Not Just Delivery Mechanism**
   Technology is used intentionally to enhance pedagogy. Moodle provides the foundation for all courses, with structured navigation, embedded media, and integrated assessments.

   Other tools - such as Padlet, ScreenPal, or interactive quiz platforms - are used selectively and reviewed through our Digital Tool Review and Adoption Policy to support engagement.

## 5   3. Programme and Course Design
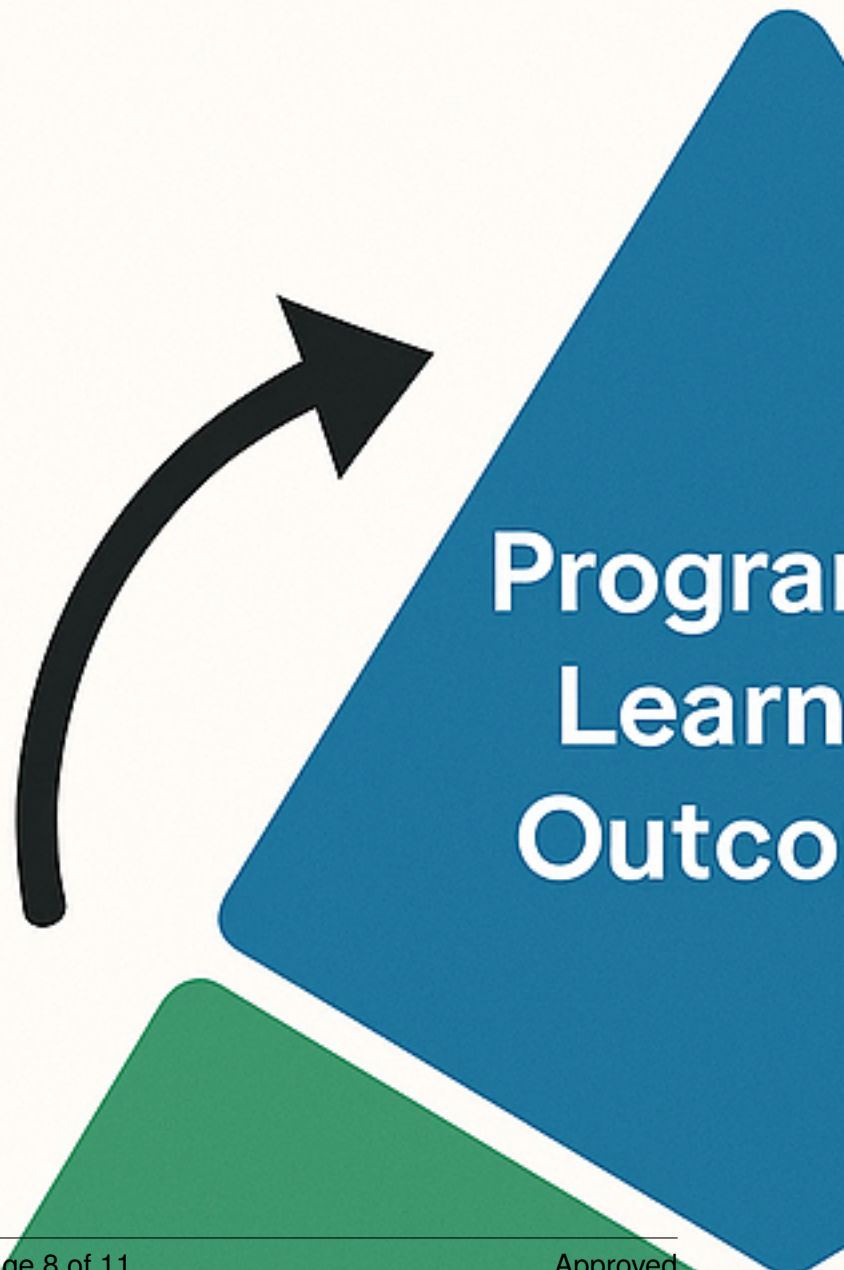
quality digital delivery. All courses delivered online must be designed from first principles with clarity, coherence, accessibility, and constructive alignment at their core.

Online learning is not an adaptation of classroom teaching but a distinct mode of provision. Therefore, the design of all QQI-accredited programmes must:

- Align explicitly with Module Intended Learning Outcomes (MIPLOs) and Programme Learning Outcomes (PLOs) through appropriately chosen learning activities, assessment methods, and learner supports.

- Be structured in accordance with the College's standard digital delivery model, which emphasises structured flexibility, scaffolded progression, and weekly pedagogical rhythm.

- Integrate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles from the outset to ensure content is accessible, inclusive, and adaptable to diverse learner needs and contexts.

- Be compatible with the core institutional VLE (Moodle), including adherence to the approved weekly layout structure and clarity of navigation, assessment expectations, and support pathways.

- Include purposeful use of digital tools and resources that enhance learning, rather than replicate classroom practice.

All programme design and validation processes are governed by the Programme Design policy and the QA Manual. This framework defines the pedagogical model that underpins them. New and revised programmes must demonstrate compliance with this framework at programme approval stage and during annual and cyclical reviews.

# 6 4. Teaching and Delivery

Online learning at The Open College is defined by intentional pedagogy, not passive content delivery. Tutors are not content uploaders - they are facilitators of learning, dialogue, and critical reflection. Teaching is active, relational, and grounded in clearly defined expectations.

All delivery must be structured around the following strategic commitments:

- **Tutor Presence**: Tutors are expected to maintain a regular, visible presence in both asynchronous and synchronous environments. This includes proactive communication, engagement in discussion spaces, and the provision of timely, constructive feedback.

- **Asynchronous Learning**: The primary mode of delivery is asynchronous, allowing learners to engage flexibly. All modules must support self-directed learning through clear weekly structures, interactive tasks, and embedded reflective prompts.

- **Synchronous Touchpoints**: Live sessions are a required component of online provision and must be pedagogically purposeful. These sessions (delivered via Big-BlueButton or Microsoft Teams) are designed for interaction, collaboration, and application — not content transmission.

- **Engagement by Design**: All modules must incorporate opportunities for learner interaction with content, peers, and tutors. Forums, collaborative activities, quizzes, and feedback loops are strategically deployed to support deep learning and learner motivation.

Tutors are expected to facilitate learning in alignment with the programme's intended learning outcomes and this framework's pedagogical principles. Programme Leads are responsible for ensuring delivery quality and adherence to expectations.

This framework does not dictate method; it defines minimum strategic requirements for high-quality online teaching. Individual styles are welcomed - within a shared model of structured, supported, and reflective online learning.

# 7   5. Assessment and Strategic Integration

Assessment in digital programmes must align with the College's overarching Assessment and Academic Integrity Policy. This framework does not duplicate that policy, but sets the strategic expectation that all assessment practices in online delivery are:

- **Constructively aligned** with module and programme learning outcomes

- **Authentic**, promoting meaningful application of knowledge and skills

- **Inclusive**, incorporating Universal Design for Assessment principles from the outset

- **Feasible in digital environments**, without reliance on invigilation or time-bound examinations

- **Integrity-aware**, designed to reduce opportunities for academic misconduct and misuse of generative AI

Assessment methods must be intentionally selected to suit online delivery, including appropriate use of formative tasks, feedback cycles, and reflective components. Assessment briefs, submission methods, and criteria must be accessible, unambiguous, and fully embedded in the VLE.

Programme validation, annual reviews, and external examiner feedback processes must demonstrate that assessment is strategically integrated into digital delivery in line with this framework.

# 8   6. Quality Assurance and Review

This framework is embedded within The Open College's Quality Assurance system and forms a benchmark for the design, delivery, and evaluation of all online provision.

The effectiveness of the framework is maintained through structured QA mechanisms, including:

- **Programme Approval and Validation**: All new or revised programmes must demonstrate alignment with the principles and expectations set out in this framework. The QA Office and Programme Validation Panel will assess digital design quality, alignment with outcomes, and suitability for online delivery.

- **Annual and Cyclical Reviews**: Programme and module reviews must evaluate the implementation of this framework, including learner engagement, tutor presence, and digital assessment alignment. Feedback from students, tutors, and external examiners is triangulated to inform updates.

- **Course Audits**: Periodic spot checks of Moodle modules are conducted to ensure layout consistency, content accessibility, tutor presence, and integration of feedback mechanisms. These audits are coordinated by the Education Technologist in consultation with Programme Leads.

- **Student Feedback and Analytics**: Learner surveys, forum analysis, and platform engagement data are reviewed regularly. Trends inform programme improvements and updates to this framework.

- **Framework Review Cycle**: This framework is reviewed annually by the QA Committee and Education Technologist, with input from academic staff, student representatives, and external reviewers where appropriate. Revisions are recorded, approved by the Academic Board, and published accordingly.

The Operations Manager supports delivery infrastructure and resource planning. This includes ensuring appropriate timetabling, tutor allocation, and system reliability to meet the demands of online provision. They work in collaboration with the Education Technologist and Programme Leads to uphold the quality and feasibility of digital delivery.

The framework is designed to evolve. Its review cycle ensures that it remains responsive to technological developments, sectoral trends, learner needs, and statutory requirements - including QQI's QA guidelines for blended and fully online learning.

# 9   7. Conclusion and Governance

This Online Learning Framework articulates The Open College's institutional approach to the design, delivery, and assurance of high-quality online learning. It defines the strategic, pedagogical, and quality expectations that underpin all digital provision across QQI-accredited programmes.

The framework is approved by the Academic Board and forms part of the College's Quality Assurance documentation. It is referenced during programme validation, annual monitoring, and cyclical review processes.

Governance of this framework is shared across the Academic Board, Programme Leads, the Education Technologist, and the Operations Manager. Each plays a distinct role in ensuring that online programmes are intentionally designed, appropriately resourced, and consistently delivered in line with institutional standards.

All staff involved in the design, delivery, or support of online programmes are expected to be familiar with this framework and ensure their practice reflects its principles.