Programme Development & Validation Framework v1

The Open College

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Contents

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

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1   Contents

2   Document Control

Document Version
   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

Programme Development & Validation Framework

3   1. Introduction:

This framework outlines the structured, quality-assured approach to the development, design, approval, validation, implementation, and review of all QQI-accredited programmes

at The Open College. It aligns with The Open College's Strategic Plan (2024-2026), the QA Manual 2025, and QQI's Core and Topic-Specific Statutory QA Guidelines, particularly the 'Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes (QG8)'.

4   2. Overarching Principles:

The development and validation of programmes at The Open College are guided by the following overarching principles:

- **Learner-Centredness:** Programmes are designed to meet the needs of diverse online learners, promoting engagement, flexibility, and successful outcomes.

- **Quality Assurance:** All stages of programme development are subject to rigorous internal and external quality assurance processes, ensuring alignment with QQI standards and institutional best practice.

- **Strategic Alignment:** Programme development is guided by The Open College's strategic objectives, market intelligence, and sector needs, particularly concerning flexible online education.

- **Collaborative Design:** Programme development involves collaboration between academic staff, subject matter experts, the Education Technologist, administrative staff, and, where appropriate, external stakeholders and learners.

- **Regulatory Compliance:** All programmes are developed in compliance with QQI requirements, relevant legislation (e.g., GDPR, European Accessibility Act), and institutional policies.

- **Continuous Improvement:** The framework supports a cycle of ongoing monitoring, review, and enhancement of programmes based on data, feedback, and evolving best practice.

5   3. Stages of Programme Development and Validation

The programme development and validation process at The Open College is structured into the following distinct stages:

5.1   3.1. Stage 1: Programme Proposal and Conceptualisation

- **Description:** This stage involves identifying the need for a new programme or significant revision to an existing programme, gathering evidence to support the rationale, and securing initial approval to proceed.

- **Key Activities and Considerations:**

  – Needs Identification: Market research, learner demand analysis, employer/industry consultation, alignment with national skills policy and The Open College's Strategic Plan.

> – **Rationale Development:** Articulating the programme's purpose, target learner profile, and strategic fit.
>
> – **Resource Assessment:** Preliminary consideration of staffing, budget, technology, and support requirements.
>
> – **Delivery Mode Suitability:** Initial assessment of suitability for fully online or blended delivery based on criteria in the Online Learning Strategy.
>
> – Submission of Initial Programme Proposal to the Academic Board for in-principle approval.

- **Governance and Oversight:** Academic Board, Leadership Team, Programme Development Teams (PDTs).

- **Relevant College Documents:**

  – (1.1) INITIAL PROGRAMME PROPOSAL TEMPLATE

  – Programme Validation Framework (Section 2.1)

  – Online Learning Strategy

  – QA Manual 2025 (Section 1, 7)

- **External References:**

  – QQI Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines.

5.2   3.2. Stage 2: Programme Design and Development

- **Description:** This stage focuses on the detailed design of the programme, including curriculum, learning outcomes, assessment strategies, learning materials, and delivery plans, specifically for the online environment.

- **Key Activities and Considerations:**

  – **Programme Philosophy and Aims:** Defining vision, values, overall aims, and objectives.

  – **Curriculum Design:** Developing Module Intended Programme Learning Outcomes (MIPLOs) and Module Intended Module Learning Outcomes (MIMLOs), ensuring constructive alignment. Mapping learning outcomes to assessment methods.

  – **Online Pedagogy:** Explicit application of The Open College's Online Learning Framework, including principles of structured flexibility, tutor presence, synchronous/asynchronous balance, active and reflective learning, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

  – **Accessibility:** Designing all content, interactions, and assessments in line with WCAG 2.1 and EAA 2025 requirements, supported by the Education Technologist and 'Accessibility Basics' training (ref: Staff Training Development Plan).

  – **Assessment Strategy:** Developing fair, valid, reliable, and authentic assessments suitable for online delivery, addressing academic integrity (including AI use) as per the Assessment Policy and 'AI & Academic Integrity' training (ref: Staff Training Development Plan). Utilisation of the 'Accessible Assignment Template'.

— Learning Materials and Resources: Planning for the creation/curation of accessible and engaging online learning materials; considering Open Educational Resources (OERs).

— Technology Integration: Purposeful selection of digital tools and platforms (Moodle, BigBlueButton, etc.) to support learning and engagement.

— Workload Calculation: Ensuring learner effort aligns with credit value.

— Staffing and CPD: Identifying staffing expertise and any CPD needs for online delivery (ref: Staff Training and Development Policy).

— Drafting of Programme Specifications, Module Descriptors, and sample Assessment Briefs.

- **Governance and Oversight:** Programme Development Teams (PDTs), Education Technologist, Programme Leaders, Academic Board.

- **Relevant College Documents:**

  — Programme Validation Framework.docx (Section 2.2)

  — Online Learning Framework

  — Assessment Policy

  — Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy

  — QA Manual 2025 (Sections 7, 9, 10, 11)

  — Procedures Document (Version 9) (Sections 7-11)

  — Sample Template (11) Module Descriptor

  — Sample Template (13) Assessment Brief Template

  — Sample Template (12) MIMLOs

  — Staff Training Development Plan - AI & Accessibility

- **External References:**

  — QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes (QG8).

5.3   3.3. Stage 3: Internal Review and Approval for Validation

- **Description:** This stage involves rigorous internal review of the drafted programme documentation to ensure completeness, coherence, compliance with QQI and institutional standards, and readiness for external validation.

- **Key Activities and Considerations:**

  — Internal Peer Review: Review by senior academic and QA staff.

  — Documentation Check: Ensuring completeness and consistency of all validation documents (Programme Descriptor, Module Descriptors, Assessment Strategy, Staffing Plans, etc.).

  — Compliance Audit: Alignment with QQI Core and Topic-Specific Guidelines (especially QG8), Online Learning Framework, Assessment Policy, and other relevant institutional policies.

– Suitability for Online Delivery: Specific review of pedagogical design, learner support, and technical infrastructure for fully online programmes.

– Feedback and Revision: Addressing feedback from internal review and making necessary revisions.

– Formal Submission to Academic Governance Committee (or equivalent Academic Board function) for approval to proceed to QQI validation.

- **Governance and Oversight:** Academic Board, Academic Policy and QA Committee, Leadership Team.

- **Relevant College Documents:**

  – Programme Validation Framework(Section 2.3, 2.4).

  – QA Manual 2025 (Section 8, Governance sections).

  – Strategic and Operational Management Structure - The Open College

  – Procedures Document (Version 9) (Section 8).

- **External References:**

  – QQI Core Validation Policy and Criteria.

  – QQI Programme Validation Manual for Providers.

5.4   3.4. Stage 4: External Validation (QQI)

- **Description:** This stage involves submitting the programme to QQI for external validation and engaging with the QQI validation panel process.

- **Key Activities and Considerations:**

  – Preparation and Submission: Compiling and submitting all required documentation to QQI via their designated system.

  – Validation Panel Engagement: Responding to pre-panel queries, hosting site visits (virtual or physical), and making relevant staff available for interviews.

  – Addressing Conditions/Recommendations: Responding to panel feedback, revising documentation if necessary, and confirming actions with QQI.

  – Post-Validation Actions: Updating QQI database, internal programme registers, marketing materials, and initiating platform build.

- **Governance and Oversight:** Programme Development & Validations Officer, Leadership Team, Academic Board.

- **Relevant College Documents:**

  – Programme Validation Framework.docx (Section 3)

  – QA Manual 2025.docx (Section 8)

  – Procedures Document (Version 9) IN PROGRESS 2025.docx (Section 8)

- **External References:**

  – QQI Core Validation Policy and Criteria

  – QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes (QG8)

5.5 3.5. Stage 5: Programme Implementation and Platform Build

- **Description:** Following successful validation, this stage involves preparing for the launch and delivery of the programme, including VLE setup and staff/learner preparation.

- **Key Activities and Considerations:**

  - VLE Course Creation: Building Moodle course shells using approved templates, ensuring accessibility and consistent navigation (ref: Online Learning Framework, QA Manual).

  - Content Population: Uploading and organising learning materials and activities.

  - Staff Briefing and Training: Ensuring all teaching and support staff are familiar with the programme, online delivery model, and relevant platforms/tools (ref: Staff Training and Development Policy).

  - Learner Onboarding: Developing and delivering induction materials and sessions specific to the online learning environment (ref: QA Manual, Procedures Document - Learner Support).

  - Final QA Checks: Education Technologist reviews and signs off on course readiness, including accessibility and functionality.

- **Governance and Oversight:** Education Technologist, Programme Leaders, Operations Manager.

- **Relevant College Documents:**

  - Online Learning Framework (Section 3, 4).

  - QA Manual 2025 (Sections on VLE Standards, Learner Support).

  - Procedures Document (Version 9) (Sections on Programme Design, Learning Environment).

  - Staff Training and Development Policy

5.6 3.6. Stage 6: Programme Monitoring, Review, and Enhancement

- **Description:** This stage involves the ongoing monitoring of the programme post-launch, cyclical reviews, and the implementation of enhancements to ensure continued quality and relevance.

- **Key Activities and Considerations:**

  - Data Collection: Gathering data on learner engagement (Moodle analytics), progression, completion rates, and achievement.

  - Feedback Mechanisms: Systematic collection of feedback from learners (module evaluations), staff, and external stakeholders.

  - Annual Programme Monitoring: Reviewing programme performance against intended outcomes and benchmarks.

  - Cyclical Programme Review: In-depth review of the programme at defined intervals, leading to action plans for improvement or revalidation.

    – Implementing Enhancements: Making evidence-based changes to curriculum, assessment, delivery, or support services.

    – Reporting: Communicating review outcomes and action plans to relevant governance bodies (e.g., Academic Board) and stakeholders.

- **Governance and Oversight:** Academic Board, Academic Policy and QA Committee, Programme Leaders, Education Technologist, Operations Manager.

- **Relevant College Documents:**

    – QA Manual 2025 (Section 12, and relevant review procedures)

    – Online Learning Framework.docx (Section 6)

    – Assessment Policy (Section 7)

    – Procedures Document (Version 9) (Section 12, 8.4)

6   4. Policy Review

- **Cycle:** This Programme Development and Validation Policy Framework will be reviewed every three years, or earlier if significant changes occur in QQI guidelines or institutional strategy.

- **Responsibility:** Academic Policy and Quality Assurance Committee, with final approval by the Academic Board.

- **Process:** Review will involve consultation with relevant staff, consideration of feedback from validation processes, and alignment with the overarching QA Manual.