Strategy for Online Learning

2025-2027

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1. Executive Summary

This document sets out National College of Ireland's (NCI) strategy to deliver high-quality, flexible, learner-centred online and blended education. NCI's **Online Learning Strategy 2025-2027** strategy is rooted in NCI's mission to "change lives through education" and aligns with the priorities for students, teaching, staff, and access that are set forth in the NCI Strategic Plan 2022-2027. This strategy is also an important part of NCI's compliance with QQI's (2023) *Statutory QA Guidelines for Blended and Fully Online Programmes*[1], and supports NCI to deliver on its Policy and QA commitments to Online and Blended Learning. [2]

This strategy will be delivered from 2025-2027, aligning with the NCI Strategic Plan 2022-2027 to ensure that online and blended learning developments support institutional priorities such as student growth and programme innovation. Alignment to the current NCI Strategic Plan timeline will allow for a seamless transition into the next strategic planning cycle, from 2028. The three-year period is also short enough to allow a dynamic approach to online learning – one that is responsive to both internal and external stimuli in the medium term.

The National Skills Strategy 2025[3] emphasises digital competence as a priority for lifelong learning, recognising that globally, online and blended learning are now critical components of modern higher education. However, as QQI's *Statutory Guidelines* (ibid.) attest, it is essential that online learners' academic and wider learner experience is at the very least comparable, in quality, to that of the on-campus, in-person learner and this requires additional effort on the part of the College or University:

"*Used effectively, relevant technologies have the potential to enhance educators' ability to provide high-quality and responsive instruction, increase learner engagement and generate more inclusive and equitable learning opportunities. These potential benefits are not automatic; their achievement requires significant investment and pedagogical leadership*".[4]

NCI's strategy seeks to respond to the evolving needs of learners, staff, and stakeholders by providing a framework that enables academic excellence and learner engagement, underpinned by robust quality assurance. It addresses the unique challenges and

[1] Available at: statutory-quality-assurance-guidelines-for-providers-of-blended-and-fully-online-programmes-2023_1.pdf

[2] NCI's Policy on the Quality Assurance of Online and Blended Learning is part of the overall Quality Assurance and Enhancement System and forms Chapter 13 of the QA Handbook

[3] Available at: Layout 1

[4] Quote from QQI (2023) Statutory QA Guidelines for Blended and Fully online programmes; page 5.

opportunities of technology-mediated learning while upholding NCI's core values of inclusivity, integrity, and learner-centredness.

2. Vision and Strategic Direction

The National College of Ireland (NCI) recognises the transformative potential of online and blended learning as key components of the modern higher education landscape.

Online learning offers unparalleled opportunities for flexibility, accessibility, and programme innovation, allowing NCI to reach diverse learner cohorts both locally and – over time – transnationally. [5]

Grounded in the principles outlined in the 2023 *Statutory Guidelines for Blended and Fully Online Programmes*, as well as NCI's own QA Handbook Chapter 13 policy and guidelines, this strategy establishes a clear vision for the future of online learning at NCI. By integrating pedagogically sound practices, fostering learner engagement, and building institutional capacity, NCI aims to set a benchmark for excellence in online education.

2.1. Vision for Online Learning at NCI

NCI will deliver high-quality online learning that reflects core values of inclusivity, access and learner centredness. NCI online learning will use innovative, technology-enhanced pedagogies to meet learner and industry needs.

The document that follows outlines the strategic pillars, governance structures, and quality assurance measures that will guide the development and implementation of online and blended learning at NCI. It serves as a roadmap for embedding innovative,

[5] **Note on Transnational Learning**
This strategy does not address transnational online education. The institution's focus for 2025–2027 is on strengthening fully online and flexible learning models within the operational scope of fully online National. However, the technological and support infrastructure, pedagogical and assessment practices and insights developed through this strategy will form a critical foundation for informing future NCI strategic directions in transnational online learning.

learner-centred practices into our educational offerings while maintaining the high standards of quality and integrity that define NCI.

3. Definitions

As the online learning world evolves at pace, clarity in the definitions of different types of provision are increasingly important. This section establishes key definitions for NCI's online learning framework, ensuring alignment with QQI's 2023 statutory guidelines (ibid.) and international best practices. These definitions form the foundation for NCI's strategic approach to online education.

3.1.1. Blended Learning

Blended learning at NCI refers to educational programmes that combine traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning components. This integration allows for a mix of synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (self-paced) activities, providing flexibility and accessibility while maintaining structured in-person engagement.

This definition aligns with QQI's description of blended learning as:

"A type of education where teaching, learning and assessment occur using a mix of online and on-site learning with the online components taking place synchronously, asynchronously, or in combination."

3.1.2. Fully Online Learning

Fully online learning at NCI encompasses programmes where all teaching, learning, and assessment activities take place entirely online. These programmes leverage digital platforms to facilitate both synchronous and asynchronous interactions, eliminating the need for on-site attendance.

QQI defines fully online learning as:

"*A type of education where teaching, learning and assessment occur online, either synchronously, asynchronously, or in combination and where no onsite instruction is required*."

3.1.3. Synchronous Online Learning

Synchronous online learning at NCI refers to learning experiences that require real-time interaction which is mediated by technology. Typically, this will refer to learners engaging in live interaction sessions which are supported by voice, video, audio and text, eg via the college's Teams platform. These sessions are normally timetabled via the Central Timetable Office and facilitated by subject matter experts.

Synchronous online learning is a component of both blended and fully online programmes, and at NCI, aligns with QQI's recognition that synchronous online learning is:

"Teachers and learners gathering at the same time and virtual place and interacting in 'real-time'".

3.1.4. Asynchronous Learning

Asynchronous learning at NCI refers to learning experiences that do not require real-time interaction. Instead, learners engage with materials such as recorded lectures, discussion forums, quizzes, and digital assignments, at their own pace, within set deadlines. This approach supports flexibility, particularly for part-time, international, or working students. At NCI, while a variety of asynchronous learning approaches are utilized, only content that contributes to learner effort hours is classified as 'Directed eLearning', signifying that this is a structured, guided, and monitored process designed to actively support student learning and progression within their programme.

While asynchronous learning is a component of both blended and online programmes, it aligns with QQI's recognition that asynchronous online learning is:

"Learners accessing online materials at their own pace and interacting with their teacher and peers at times that work around other commitments."

4. The Six Pillars of NCI's Online Learning Strategy

Pillar	Our Goal is to:
Pillar One **Governance and Oversight**	Build upon the existing corporate and academic governance structures to guide and quality assure the development, delivery, and monitoring of online and blended programmes.
Pillar Two **Programme Design and Delivery**	Implement pedagogically sound frameworks for the validation and delivery of online and blended programmes that prioritise active learning, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and the effective use of technology.
Pillar Three **Learner Experience**	Enhance the online learning experience through equitable access to resources, personalised supports, and robust mechanisms for engagement and feedback.
Pillar Four **Staff Development**	Build upon institutional capacity through comprehensive training, professional

	development opportunities, and the promotion of communities of practice in online education.
Pillar Five **Infrastructure and Resources**	Invest in sustainable technology and digital infrastructure to support high-quality teaching, learning, and assessment in virtual environments.
Pillar Six **Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement**	Align with QQI guidelines to ensure rigorous quality assurance processes and foster a culture of continuous improvement through regular evaluation and stakeholder feedback.

4.1. Pillar One: Governance and Oversight

Governance and oversight are central to ensuring the integrity, quality, and sustainability of NCI's online and blended learning programmes. This section outlines the institutional structures and processes that guide the proposal, validation, and delivery of such programmes, ensuring alignment with NCI's strategic objectives and compliance with quality assurance standards.

4.1.1. Academic Governance Structure

The Governing Body is ultimately responsible for the governance and management of quality across the institution. It delegates this responsibility to its own sub-committees, as well as to the Academic Council, Senior Management Team (SMT) and Executive Group (EG). The below figure shows the governance and management structure, with academic governance committees in yellow and executive/ management committees in blue

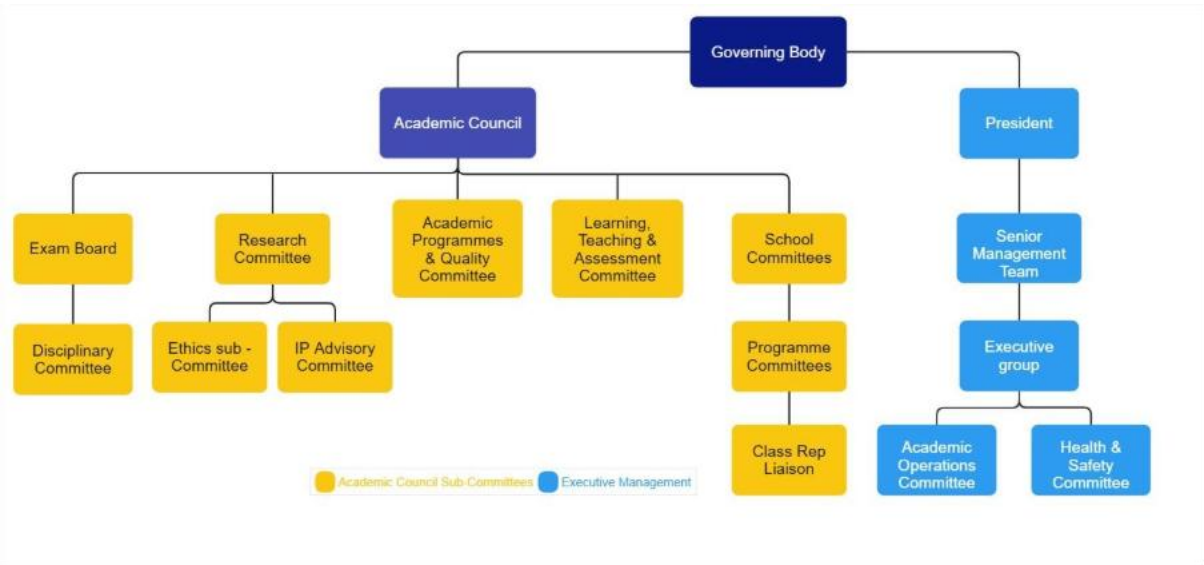


Figure 1: Academic Governance and Management Structure

4.1.2. Programme Proposal and Validation Process

The development and approval of online and blended programmes at NCI follow a rigorous, multi-stage process as outlined in the NCI Quality Assurance Handbook (Chapter 3). This process ensures that all programmes meet academic, institutional, and regulatory standards before implementation.

Academic Programme governance is the responsibility of the Academic Council, supported by relevant sub-committees and, within Schools, the School and Programme Committees which are chaired by Programme Directors. The NCI Executive hold responsibility for the business viability and financial sustainability of the academic programme portfolio.

A Programme Lifecycle Management Executive Sub-Group (PLM ESG) created in 2021, provides an effective mechanism for Academic Council and the Executive to ensure that the College portfolio of programmes remains current and relevant to societal, industry, and learner needs and that the portfolio is scalable and sustainable to deliver. The PLM ESG monitors the performance of existing programmes and NCI collaborative partnerships across four stages in the programme lifecycle.

At Stage 1 Programme Design & Development:

- A business need or opportunity is identified by the School/CELL.
- A Programme Opportunity Proposal (POP) Form is then submitted which is the formal mechanism for programme approval, incorporating market analysis, employer feedback, and institutional priorities (Programmes which contain elements of online learning, including scope for online assessment must indicate this in the form. The form by design will automatically notify relevant departments (Teaching Enhancement, Exams) of the proposal for review.
- PLM-ESG will either recommend that the proposal gains approval at Academic Council and Executive Group to proceed to development or request further information or reject support of the programme.
- Once approval to proceed has been granted, programme teams with guidance from their academic leaders, Teaching Enhancement, QIE Department and other support units as necessary in NCI, develop programme specifications in line with QQI validation policy and criteria.
- Programme teams prepare for QQI validation.

4.1.3. Policy Framework

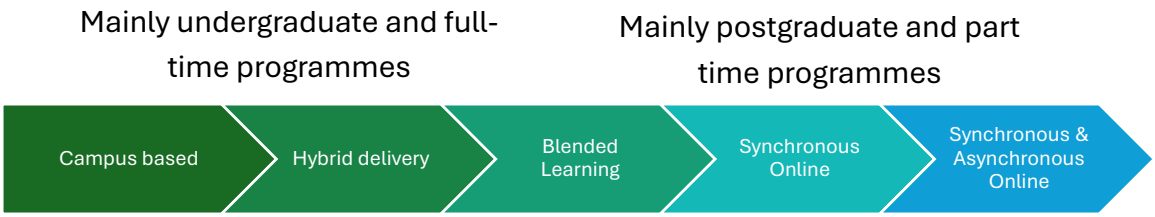
NCI's policies on programme development, validation, and evaluation are designed to uphold the highest standards of academic quality and governance. Key elements include:

- **Clarity of Roles and Responsibilities**:
    - Academic Council: Oversees all academic policies and the approval of new programmes.
    - Programme Directors: Manage the academic and operational aspects of programmes.
    - Digital Learning Design Team: Provides expertise in instructional design and ensures the integration of technology-mediated learning strategies.
- **Quality Assurance**:
    - Alignment with QQI's guidelines for blended and fully online programmes.
    - Regular reviews to ensure programmes remain relevant, innovative, and responsive to learner needs.
- **Stakeholder Engagement**:
    - Inclusion of industry representatives and external academic experts in validation panels.
    - Active consultation with learners to inform programme design and delivery.

By embedding these robust governance structures and processes, NCI ensures that its online and blended learning programmes uphold the institution's standards of academic excellence while meeting the evolving needs of learners and the broader educational landscape.

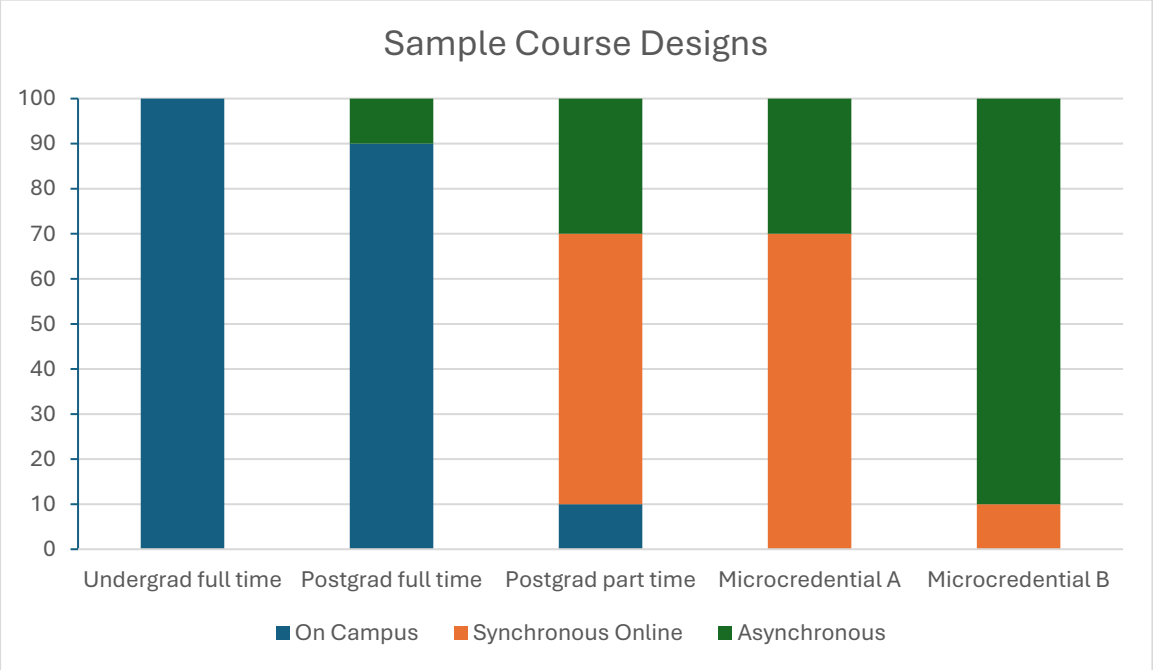
4.2. Pillar Two: Programme Design and Delivery

NCI Spectrum of Flexible Delivery



As illustrated above, all programmes at NCI are intentionally designed along this spectrum of learning modalities to align with the needs of their target learners, balancing access, flexibility, and effective learning design.

The examples below illustrate how different programmes' guided learner effort hours can be structured within this framework. Please note, these are representative models, and actual course designs at NCI may incorporate any combination of these modalities, tailored to best support learning outcomes.



While NCI supports flexible and accessible asynchronous learning, for reasons of academic integrity, student engagement, and overall learning experience, it is envisioned that "fully" asynchronous programmes will retain some synchronous elements. These may include activities such as supervision meetings, peer collaboration, group work, or assessment components (e.g. vivas or presentations) to support academic standards and meaningful student interaction.

Programme Design and Delivery

Programme design and delivery at NCI is informed by the institution's commitment to learner-centered education and the principles outlined in Chapter 13 of the NCI Quality Assurance Handbook and the NCI Strategic Plan 2022-2027. These frameworks ensure that online and blended learning programmes are designed to meet the diverse needs of learners while maintaining rigorous academic standards.

Design Principles

1. **Alignment with Strategic Goals**:
    - Programmes are developed to support NCI's mission to "change lives through education" and align with the strategic priorities of access, innovation, and academic excellence as outlined in the Strategic Plan.
2. **Pedagogical Foundations**:
    - All programmes adhere to the principles of active learning and incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to ensure accessibility and inclusivity for all learners.
3. **Technology Integration**:
    - Programmes leverage state-of-the-art technologies to enhance learning outcomes, including the use of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and digital tools that support synchronous and asynchronous learning.
4. **Flexibility and Accessibility**:
    - Online and blended learning programmes are designed to accommodate diverse learner needs, including those of part-time, international, and lifelong learners.

Delivery Framework

1. **Synchronous and Asynchronous Modes**:
    - Delivery incorporates a balanced mix of live (synchronous) sessions and self-paced (asynchronous) learning activities to support engagement and flexibility.
2. **Learner Supports**:
    - Comprehensive supports are provided to learners, including orientation sessions, technical assistance, and access to digital library resources, as detailed in Chapter 13 of the Quality Assurance Handbook.
3. **Assessment Strategies**:

- Assessments are designed to align with programme learning outcomes and ensure academic integrity, leveraging tools such as Turnitin and online proctoring where appropriate.

4. **Feedback and Evaluation**:
    - Mechanisms for ongoing feedback and evaluation are embedded into programme delivery, allowing for continuous improvement and alignment with learner needs.

Innovation and Continuous Improvement

NCI's approach to programme design and delivery emphasizes innovation and a commitment to continuous improvement. Regular reviews and stakeholder consultations ensure that programmes remain relevant and responsive to the evolving educational landscape, fulfilling NCI's vision for transformative education in the digital age.

4.2.1. Online Programme Feasibility

As part of the National College of Ireland's (NCI) commitment to expanding access to high-quality education, the institution has developed a structured Online Programme Feasibility Framework. This framework ensures that new online programmes align with institutional priorities, maintain academic excellence, and meet the needs of diverse learners.

This section outlines NCI's approach to online education, the research undertaken, and its alignment with the institution's strategic goals.

Strategic Approach to Online Education

NCI's approach is built on key principles to guide decision-making for online programme delivery:

1. Pedagogical Excellence – Ensuring online programmes achieve the same learning outcomes and academic rigor as face-to-face delivery, with a strong focus on engagement and student success.
2. Quality Assurance & Compliance – Aligning with QQI statutory guidelines for synchronous and asynchronous online education.
3. Market Demand & Sustainability – Conducting evidence-based market analysis to determine demand, sustainability, and competitiveness in online contexts.
4. Technology & Infrastructure Readiness – Ensuring NCI's digital platforms, learning tools, and support services can deliver high-quality, scalable online learning experiences.

5. Student-Centered Approach – Providing comprehensive learner support, engagement strategies, and inclusive learning environments.

Research & Best Practice Review

The Online Programme Feasibility Framework is informed by extensive research and international best practices, including:

- QQI Guidelines for Online Education – Compliance with national regulatory standards for programme validation and quality assurance.
- Academic research on online learning effectiveness, engagement, and best practices in digital pedagogy.
- Assessing the demand for fully online programmes in domestic markets.

Alignment with NCI's Strategic Plan

This framework directly supports the NCI Strategic Plan 2022-2027 by:

- Expanding Access to Education – Increasing opportunities for diverse learners, including international students and working professionals.
- Enhancing Teaching & Learning Excellence – Embedding Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and best practices in online pedagogy.
- Digital Transformation – Investing in high-quality digital learning experiences and future-proofing NCI's education models.

Implementation & Decision-Making Framework

To operationalize this strategy, NCI has integrated the Online Programme Feasibility Checklist into the programme proposal process. The checklist is assessed as part of Academic Council's programme approval process through its relevant subcommittees, ensuring rigorous evaluation across key domains, including pedagogical quality, regulatory compliance, market demand, technology, student support, and financial sustainability.

By embedding research-driven insights and a structured decision-making approach, this framework empowers programme teams to make informed, strategic choices about online education. NCI remains committed to maintaining excellence, accessibility, and innovation in digital education while ensuring alignment with institutional priorities and regulatory expectations.

4.3. Pillar Three: Learner Experience

The learner experience is at the core of NCI's commitment to excellence in online and blended education. Guided by Chapter 13 of the Quality Assurance Handbook and the strategic objectives outlined in the NCI Strategic Plan 2022-2027, this section focuses

on enhancing the learning journey through robust supports, active engagement, and a focus on inclusivity.

4.3.1. Access and Equity

1. **Equitable Access**:
    - Online and blended programmes are designed to ensure that all learners, regardless of geographic location, socioeconomic background, or abilities, can participate fully in their education.
    - Access to digital tools and resources, including loan devices and assistive technologies, is provided to bridge the digital divide.
2. **Inclusivity and Universal Design**:
    - Learning materials and activities are developed using the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to accommodate diverse learning styles and needs.
    - Accessibility features, such as closed captions, transcripts, and screen-reader compatibility, are standard across all digital content.

4.3.2. Engagement and Support

1. **Learner Orientation**:
    - Comprehensive orientation programmes are provided to introduce learners to the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), online tools, and digital best practices. Orientation for fully online learners is bespoke, tailored to the delivery modality and includes:
    - Explanation of the functions and best etiquette of MS Teams, how to access online services, and the online MS and college applications available to students.
    - A comprehensive guide of how to access online resources and services from the library.
    - Introduction to support staff so learners know how to contact them and feel comfortable doing so.
    - Opportunity for learners to ask any questions they have.
2. **Supports available:**
    - Financial support: Domestic students who study at the National College of Ireland can avail of the Student Assistance Fund. This fund provides

financial support to full or part time students who are experiencing financial difficulties while attending college.

- Student wellbeing: Student Counselling is available to all students at the National College of Ireland. This is a confidential service that students can avail of in person or through online platforms. Students also have access to the Silvercloud online mental health platform which hosts self-guided programmes specifically tailored for students, covering topics such as stress and anxiety.
- Academic Support: 'Getting to Grips' drop-in sessions are available to all students multiple times a week. These online individual tutoring sessions are based around supporting learners in academic writing, reading, researching, studying, note-taking, exam revision and in general, a focus on aiding a student in all manners of academic advancement.
- Learning Disability Support: Students with a diagnosed illness or disorder can avail of extra supports during their studies and assessments. Students can meet with the Learning Disability Officer online for support with academic tasks, time management, and other factors tailored to the individual student.

3. **Community Building**:

Fostering a sense of belonging and identity is essential to the success and wellbeing of fully online learners. Recognising the challenges that can arise in virtual environments such as social isolation and reduced peer interaction; NCI is committed to building vibrant, inclusive, and supportive learning communities in the digital space.

Community Building Strategies
NCI embeds opportunities for community and identity development across all online programmes through intentional design and structured supports. These include:

- Interactive discussion forums and collaborative group projects that promote peer-to-peer engagement and social presence.
- Live synchronous sessions that go beyond content delivery to include icebreakers, reflective discussion, and social learning activities.
- The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, which underpins programme design and guides the development of teaching, cognitive, and social presence in online learning.

Student Representation and Peer Leadership
The Class Representative system plays a central role in fostering student voice and community cohesion. For fully online learners:

- The Students' Union (SU) provides bespoke training tailored to the online context, ensuring reps are confident in supporting their peers and advocating effectively.
- The College and SU jointly prioritise early election of class reps for each new online intake to ensure student representation is embedded from the outset.

Digital Cafés and Peer Social Spaces
To complement academic engagement, NCI and the SU will facilitate Digital Cafés in fully online modalities; informal, student-led virtual spaces designed to promote connection, conversation, and shared identity among online learners. These cafés provide a relaxed setting for learners to meet regularly, build friendships, and combat isolation.

Online Student Forum
For fully online learners, NCI will also facilitate an Online Student Representative Forum, co-facilitated by the Students' Union and College staff. This initiative provides a structured space for reps to raise student issues, share feedback, and collaborate on community-enhancing initiatives across the online student body.

Through these initiatives, NCI is building a distinctive online student culture rooted in inclusion, peer support, and meaningful engagement, ensuring that every learner can feel connected, represented, and empowered throughout their academic journey.

4. **Academic and Technical Support**:
    - Dedicated support teams are available to assist learners with academic inquiries and technical issues.
    - Resources such as tutoring, writing support, and career services are integrated into the online learning experience.

4.3.3. Feedback and Continuous Improvement

1. **Learner Feedback**:
    - Regular surveys and feedback mechanisms allow learners to share their experiences and suggest improvements.
    - Feedback is analysed and used to refine programme delivery and support structures.
2. **Monitoring Outcomes**:
    - Key performance indicators (KPIs), such as retention rates, learner satisfaction, and academic performance, are monitored to evaluate the effectiveness of the learner experience.

4.3.4. Health and Wellbeing

1. **Holistic Support**:
    - Online programmes incorporate resources and activities to promote mental health and wellbeing, such as virtual counselling and wellness workshops.
2. **Flexible Learning Options**:
    - Flexibility in course schedules and assessment timelines ensures that learners can balance their education with personal and professional commitments.

By prioritizing access, engagement, and wellbeing, NCI ensures that its online and blended programmes provide an enriching and inclusive learning experience that empowers all learners to achieve their full potential.

4.4. Pillar Four: Staff Development and Capacity Building

4.4.1. Staff Development

Staff development is a cornerstone of NCI's Strategy for Online Learning, ensuring that all educators are equipped with the pedagogical and technological expertise needed to deliver high-quality online, blended, and asynchronous programmes. Guided by Chapter 13 of the Quality Assurance Handbook, this section outlines NCI's comprehensive approach to building staff capacity.

Focus on Pedagogy

Training emphasizes the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework; integrating cognitive, social, and teaching presence, alongside Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to create engaging, inclusive, and accessible online learning environments for all learners.

Training and Support Opportunities

Opportunity	**Description**
Induction Training (Mandatory)	Asynchronous training covering NCI's QA requirements, teaching frameworks (CoI, UDL), digital tools, and good practice for online and blended delivery.
Pre-Semester Training	The Teaching Enhancement team delivers mandatory training sessions for all staff teaching online or blended courses before each semester begins.

Year-Round Seminars	Ongoing professional development is supported through seminars on advanced pedagogical techniques and emerging trends in online education.
Asynchronous Guidance Resources	A library of on-demand training documentation and videos are hosted on the Teaching Enhancement Moodle, allowing staff to access resources at their convenience.
One-on-One Support	Personalized support is available to staff through direct consultations with the Teaching Enhancement team.
UDL Badge Programme	The UDL badge, facilitated by the Teaching Enhancement team, is actively promoted and available to all staff, certifying expertise in inclusive teaching practices.

Building Communities of Practice

Staff are encouraged to participate in forums and workshops that facilitate the sharing of best practices and foster peer learning. By embedding professional development into the institution's culture, NCI ensures a sustained commitment to pedagogical innovation and excellence in online learning.

Through these comprehensive initiatives, NCI empowers its educators to excel in online teaching, fostering a dynamic and inclusive learning environment that aligns with the institution's strategic goals and quality assurance standards.

4.5. Pillar Five: Infrastructure and Resources

The National College of Ireland (NCI) leverages robust technological infrastructure to support its commitment to high-quality online and blended education. As a Microsoft 365 subscribed organisation, NCI utilizes a suite of integrated technologies to enhance teaching, learning, and administrative efficiency.

4.5.1. Core Platforms and Tools

Platform	Description
Moodle (Learning Management System):	Moodle serves as the primary platform for hosting course materials, facilitating discussions, and managing assessments. It provides a flexible, user-friendly environment for both synchronous and asynchronous learning activities.
Turnitin	Turnitin is employed for assignment submission and AI/plagiarism detection, ensuring academic integrity and providing detailed feedback to learners.
Microsoft Teams	Teams is the central platform for live delivery, including lectures, tutorials, and collaborative sessions. It integrates seamlessly with other Microsoft tools to enable real-time communication and interaction.
Microsoft365	As a Microsoft campus, NCI utilizes MS365 as the foundation for collaboration, communication, and digital learning. This suite of tools supports flexible learning environments, enabling both synchronous and asynchronous engagement.
PSI Online	To uphold academic integrity and flexibility in online and blended terminal assessments, NCI utilizes PSI Online as its e-proctoring solution where appropriate. This system enables secure, remote examination while maintaining rigorous quality assurance standards aligned with QQI guidelines and institutional policies.

4.5.2. Integration and Accessibility

The integration of Moodle, Turnitin, and Microsoft Teams creates a seamless digital learning environment, enabling students and staff to navigate between platforms with ease. Each platform is designed with built-in accessibility features, including screen reader compatibility, closed captioning, and customizable interface options, ensuring alignment with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. Additionally, these platforms conform to WCAG 2 (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines), reinforcing NCI's commitment to inclusive and accessible education for all learners.

4.5.3. Technical Support and Maintenance

NCI's dedicated IT support services ensure that students and staff receive timely assistance with technical issues, minimizing disruptions to teaching and learning. To maintain a secure, reliable, and innovative digital learning environment, all platforms; including Moodle, Microsoft Teams, and Turnitin, are regularly updated with the latest features, security enhancements, and accessibility improvements.

By continually investing in state-of-the-art technology infrastructure, NCI ensures that its online and blended learning programmes are supported by robust, scalable, and accessible tools, enabling a seamless and engaging educational experience for all learners and educators.

4.6. Pillar Six: Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement

NCI is committed to maintaining the highest standards of academic integrity and continuous enhancement across all online and blended programmes. Quality assurance processes are fully embedded at every stage of programme development, delivery, and review, ensuring that provision remains robust, future-focused, and aligned with sectoral best practice.

4.6.1. Quality Assurance Framework

- All online and blended provision is governed by NCI's Quality Assurance Framework, with full alignment to QQI's (2023) *Statutory Guidelines for Blended and Online Learning*.
- Programmes undergo systematic monitoring through scheduled annual reviews, learner feedback mechanisms, external examining, and data-driven analytics, ensuring continuous evaluation of academic quality, learner experience, and regulatory compliance.
- Continuous improvement is supported by proactive identification of enhancements, informed by evidence gathered through regular reporting structures and governance oversight.

4.6.2. Benchmarking and Standards

- Programmes are designed to meet both national and international standards of academic quality, ensuring that NCI's online offerings remain credible, relevant, and responsive to the evolving needs of learners and industry.
- Structured benchmarking exercises are conducted periodically against peer institutions and sector leaders to inform ongoing development, identify

innovation opportunities, and strengthen NCI's positioning within the competitive higher education landscape.

- Stakeholder engagement is central to programme enhancement, with feedback from learners, industry, academic staff, and external partners actively informing review cycles and quality enhancement planning.

5. Core Principles

The NCI Strategy for Online Learning is built upon a foundation of six pillars, which are underpinned by a set of core principles that guide the design, delivery, and continuous enhancement of online and blended learning. These principles ensure that all programmes align with NCI's mission, uphold academic excellence, and support inclusive and impactful learning experiences.

5.1.1. Flexibility and Accessibility

Learning should be flexible and designed to fit students' lives.

- Programmes are designed with delivery models and programme schedules that accommodate diverse learner needs, including full-time, part-time, international, and professional learners.
- Blended, synchronous, and asynchronous models ensure that students can engage when and how they learn best.
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles are embedded to support students with diverse learning preferences and accessibility needs.

Alignment with NCI Strategic Priority 1: Expanding Participation and Access to Higher Education

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5.1.2. Pedagogical Excellence and Engagement

Effective learning requires intentional design, interactivity, and real-world relevance.

- All online and blended programmes incorporate active learning strategies, ensuring students move beyond passive content consumption.
- The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is applied to foster cognitive, social, and teaching presence, strengthening learner engagement.

- Assessments are authentic, diverse, and designed for digital-first environments, ensuring students demonstrate meaningful skills.

Alignment with NCI Strategic Priority 2: Excellence and Innovation in Teaching, Learning, and Student Success

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5.1.3. Academic Integrity and Quality Assurance

Rigorous academic standards and quality assurance underpin all online and blended learning.

- All programmes adhere to QQI statutory guidelines for online and blended learning.
- Clear policies for online assessments, feedback, and engagement ensure integrity and reliability in student learning.
- A culture of continuous improvement is fostered through regular programme reviews, learning analytics, and student feedback loops.

Alignment with NCI Strategic Priority 3: A Future-Focused and Agile College

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5.1.4. Digital Innovation and Infrastructure

Technology should enhance learning, not just deliver content.

- NCI invests in a robust digital ecosystem, including Moodle, Microsoft Teams, and Microsoft360.
- Future-proofing strategies ensure that new technologies, including AI and learning analytics, are integrated responsibly.
- The use of data-driven insights supports both learner success and staff development.

Alignment with NCI Strategic Priority 3: A Future-Focused and Agile College

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5.1.5. Staff Development and Digital Capacity Building

Digital transformation is driven by educators, not just technology.

- Ongoing professional development ensures that faculty are equipped with digital pedagogy skills to design and deliver engaging online courses.
- Communities of Practice and peer mentoring support staff in continuously improving their digital teaching strategies.

- The Teaching Enhancement team provides structured support for innovative teaching practices.

Alignment with NCI Strategic Priority 4: A Student and Staff Experience that is Transformational and Engaging

6. Strategic Foundations

6.1. Alignment with Institutional Priorities

The NCI Strategy for Online Learning is fully aligned with the National College of Ireland (NCI) Strategic Plan 2022–2027. It supports the institution's strategic priorities, in particular; Students, Staff, Teaching, Access, and Positioning, ensuring that online, blended, and flexible learning modalities enhance the College's mission to change lives through education.

6.1.1. Students

This strategy supports the development of a distinctive, learner-centred experience that is accessible, inclusive, and empowering. Through flexible delivery models, digital student supports, and community-building initiatives such as Digital Cafés and online student representation forums, NCI ensures that all learners—regardless of background or mode of study—feel connected, supported, and engaged throughout their learning journey. This includes:

- Personalized learner support services, including dedicated orientation, digital skills training, and academic resources tailored for online and blended students.
- Investment in robust digital tools (e.g., Moodle, Microsoft Teams, AI-assisted learning tools) to enhance student engagement and success.

6.1.2. Staff

The strategy prioritises the professional development of academic and support staff, equipping them to succeed in online and blended environments. Through structured training, the promotion of digital pedagogies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, and support for communities of practice, staff are empowered to deliver high-quality, innovative teaching aligned with NCI's mission and strategic goals.

6.1.3. Teaching

Aligned with NCI's commitment to pedagogical innovation and excellence, the strategy embeds active learning, inclusive design, and authentic assessment across all online and blended programmes. Teaching is supported by a robust quality assurance framework (Chapter 13), structured validation processes, and continuous evaluation,

ensuring that programme design is future-ready, industry-informed, and learner-focused.

Key initiatives aligned with this priority include:

- Structured staff development in digital pedagogy, ensuring all faculty are equipped to deliver high-quality online teaching.
- The integration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, ensuring inclusivity across all online and blended programmes.
- Embedding the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework to strengthen teaching, social, and cognitive presence in digital environments.
- Developing innovative assessment strategies that maintain academic integrity and promote authentic learning experiences.

6.1.4. Access

Access is at the heart of NCI's Online Learning Strategy. By offering a range of flexible, fully online and blended learning options, and removing geographic and scheduling barriers, NCI expands participation among working professionals, international learners, and students with caregiving or other responsibilities. Inclusive teaching practices, supported by digital tools and UDL principles, further reinforce NCI's leadership in widening access to higher education.

6.1.5. Positioning

Through the development of a strong, sustainable online learning infrastructure, NCI reinforces its position as a distinctive and innovative higher education provider. The strategy demonstrates leadership in flexible education delivery, community engagement, and digital transformation, contributing to NCI's reputation as a nationally impactful, internationally engaged institution committed to social justice, access, and excellence.

7. Conclusion

The National College of Ireland's **Strategy for Online Learning** provides a roadmap for the delivery of our institutional commitment to delivering accessible, flexible, and high-quality blended and online education. We will ensure that online programme governance is embedded as mainstream within our QA system and we will focus our efforts and investment into learner-centred programme design and the development and maintenance of an inclusive, NCI online learner experience, underpinned by cutting-edge, well-supported technology infrastructure. We aim to meet the diverse needs of learners while fostering innovation and academic excellence across all online provision, as an integral part of our education offering.

This strategy ensures NCI remains a leader in online education, empowering learners and staff to excel in a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

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8. References

- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). (2023). Statutory QA guidelines for providers of blended and online programmes.
- National College of Ireland (NCI). [Link to be updated when Ch13 approved]
- National College of Ireland (NCI). (2022). Strategic Plan 2022-2027