

# Blended to Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Practice

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## **Abstract**

*A synergetic partnership of the Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education and the Further Education Support Services identified an educational need among Further Education and Training (FET) staff. The outcome was a jointly developed and delivered Level 9 blended learning Postgraduate Certificate in Programme Design and Validation in Further Education and Training (PGPDV). The delivery of the pilot course was significantly challenged by COVID-19's sudden arrival in March 2020, forcing the course fully online. This article gathers feedback on lessons learned and offers practical steps to guide adult educators in pivoting courses for online delivery.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Blended-Learning, Online-Learning, Student Feedback

‘It was all going so well until the pandemic struck’ – March 2020.

## **Context**

In the recent past, the Further Education and Training (FET) sector has been undergoing extensive change at all levels of organisation. The thirty-three Vocational Education Committees (VECs) were reconfigured into sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in 2013, and the education function of FÁS was transferred into the ETBs for local and regional coherence. Alongside these macro changes came many regulatory policies. The most relevant to the content of this article was the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Policies and Criteria for the Validation of Programmes of Education and Training (revised 2017), that changed the quality assurance processes underpinning programme development for FET providers.

The Further Education Support Service (FESS) had ongoing discussions with Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education on ways in which they could jointly support the professional development of FET staff. Feedback from FESS staff about the new QQI validation criteria identified their need for education and training that would support course developers to implement (QQI) Policies and Criteria for Programmes in Education and Training. Arising, the Level 9 CPD (Continuous Professional Development) Certificate in Programme Design and Validation was developed in 2019.

### **Profile of Collaborative Partners**

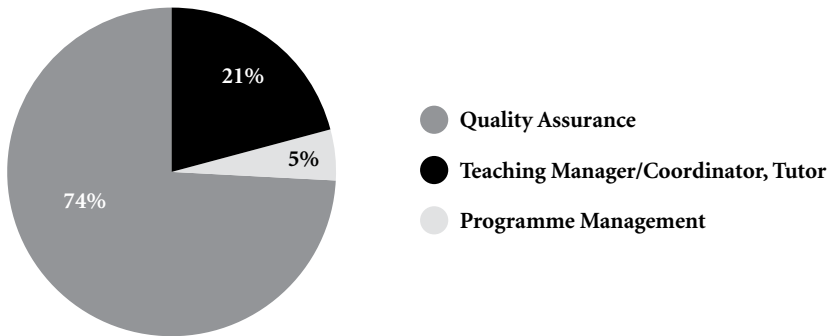
The Further Education Support Service (FESS) was set up in 1997 to provide ongoing support to Education and Training Board (ETB) FET staff and SOLAS-funded providers offering programmes leading to QQI certification. The FESS operates through the respective ETBs via an independent steering committee and is funded by SOLAS.

Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education (MUDACE) is the only higher education academic adult education department in the Republic of Ireland. Established independently in 1974, the department's course provision ranges from short part-time certificate courses and flexible degrees to postgraduate and doctorate level courses.

Finola Butler (FESS) and Dr. Josephine Finn (MUDACE) devised the 20-credit Level 9 blended learning certificate in Programme Design and Validation in Further Education and Training (PGPDV) and Maynooth University accredited the course in August 2019.

### **Introduction**

The innovative pilot Postgraduate Certificate course commenced in January 2020 with nineteen registered students: seventeen participants from nine ETBs and two participants from independent FET providers. The student profiles are outlined in Figure 1.



*Figure 1. PGPDV Student Profiles? Roles in FET*

This case study will outline the course, its mode of delivery, and how the course had to adjust to the COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020. Nothing has had such a system-wide impact at all levels of education and training delivery as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Course Team**

The PGPDV Course Teaching Team (hereafter the course team) comprised three members from FESS and four members from MUDACE including the course e-moderator who provided technical and ongoing student support, and an administrator. Initially monthly team meetings were scheduled where the team dealt with all aspects of course planning and delivery.

### **Course Outline**

The PGPDV course was co-designed and delivered in a collaborative partnership. Its purpose was to address the needs of FET staff tasked with the redesign of existing, or the development of new, FET programmes. While the QQI Policies and Criteria for Programme Design and Validation Guidelines document provided the impetus for the course, the course also addressed the general principles of course design and validation.

The course objectives were to:

- Explore the implications of current policies in FET programme design and validation

- Further develop knowledge, skills and competencies in curriculum design for programmes leading to awards from QQI and other awarding bodies, e.g. City & Guilds
- Examine curriculum design requirements associated with validation applications
- Provide and critically review theoretical and policy frameworks of adult and further education
- Provide participants with the opportunity to critically reflect on evaluation and quality assurance procedures for programme validation

The course consisted of three mandatory modules:

1. Validation of programmes in FET – history, policy, and governance (5 credits)
2. Curriculum theory and application in programme development (10 credits)
3. Critical evaluation and quality assurance in programme validation (5 credits)

### **Theoretical Framework**

A collaborative partnership by its nature brings people together from different contexts and with different approaches and philosophical positions. In some instances, these different perspectives can be difficult to negotiate, especially if positions are entrenched. On the other hand, in an open and trusting environment, different approaches can be explored and critiqued, and, through dialogue, can deliver new insights that allow creativity to flourish. This was the case in this collaboration. Without exception our, FESS and MUDACE, philosophical orientations differed and spanned across the range of adult education theory and educational purposes. The partners explored some of these ideas and their deliberations eventually rested with Malcolm Knowles' (1984, pp.46-49) four andragogical principles:

- **Adults learn better from experience (even if they make mistakes):** It was recognised that some members of the learning group had significant experience of course design and that these experiences would be invaluable to the collective learning of the group
- **Adults favour a pragmatic approach and must be able to apply learning to solve a specific problem:** The course assessment addressed the challenge of applying awarding body course validation requirements to newly designed

courses. Students would apply their learning by designing a course relevant to their work context for validation. The PGPDV course provided opportunities to critique programme validation policy and criteria; learn technical skills for programme development (writing learning outcomes, devising assessment criteria, exploring styles of RPL); and to examine concepts related to programme design

- **Adults are most interested in learning things that have immediate relevance:** The course was designed to address FET course validation needs currently pertinent for FET staff
- **Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction:** As a pilot course, ongoing formal and informal feedback invited students to suggest adjustments on the structuring of course delivery

These principles and the teaching team's commitment to the centrality of student support guided course delivery.

### **Blended Learning Design**

The original course was a blended learning design with six face-to-face workshops using participative adult education delivery methodologies. This approach normally involves significant group-work and interactive exercises to enable students to process shared knowledge, engage in critical reflection and question accepted practice assumptions. Thus, the central spine of this blended learning course would provide reflective space for students to process their learning together supported by asynchronous virtual learning environment (VLE) materials, workshops and webinars. Figure 2. charts the proposed blended learning design.

1. Induction face-to-face workshop
2. Five face-to-face workshops over the academic year
3. Content upload and participant engagement through Moodle (Maynooth University Virtual Learning Environment)
4. Programme assessment
  - i. Programme proposal presentation (Required but not marked)
  - ii. Academic essay
  - iii. Design of FET programme validation proposal and complete the respective validating body self-assessment report
  - iv. Present an end of course review of learning

*Figure 2. Blended Learning Design*

In March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, it became evident that the course team had to consider the implications and consult with the students about the future of the course. The response of the team was to re-imagine the course with everything changed – relationships, knowledge sharing, presentation of content, support arrangements and indeed the learning process itself.

### **Methodology**

A reflective approach was fundamental to writing this article. The course team shared their experience and insights, while students provided feedback through Microsoft Teams, check-ins, and anonymised feedback collected through Mentimeter.com and Microsoft Forms. Student feedback was collated highlighting consistent and sometimes surprising outcomes. The outcomes were adopted to create a fully online course and are described in the following.

### **Adjustments Adopted by Course Team Following COVID-19 Restrictions**

On 13th March, 2020, the Maynooth University Registrar instructed staff to move all teaching online with immediate effect. The course team met at short notice and decided to:

1. Consult with all students to hear their concerns and discuss the future of the course
2. Cancel upcoming face-to-face workshops
3. Begin planning fully online delivery
4. Meet weekly

### **Impact of COVID-19 Restrictions**

While the course requirements could not be changed, the course team wanted to ensure that students could voice their concerns and be involved in the decision-making process about course delivery changes. The first task was to contact each student via phone. The feedback from students was:

- The COVID-19 restrictions were being applied concurrently to their work with knock-on effects on their professional and personal situations
- Students were deeply unsettled by the situation but wished to continue

- Students requested a course delivery pause for six weeks to adjust
- That the course team should devise a plan for online delivery and circulate to students for feedback
- To revert to the original format once restrictions were lifted

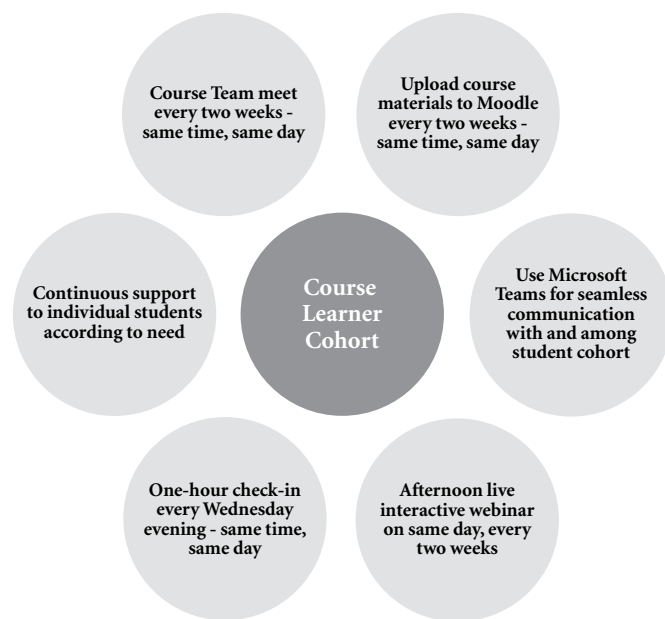
Based on this the course team set about redesigning the course delivery.

### **Redesign: A Model for Online Delivery**

The course was redesigned at the following levels – structure and timetabling; knowledge sharing; learning processes and relationship building; and student support. The e-moderator role would change significantly as students would need greater support to learn new tools and skills that might be unfamiliar to them for fully online learning.

- **Structure and timetabling** needed to change to ensure best fit with students' work/life schedules. This required the course team meet regularly to manage change and provide consistent responses to course adaptations. A new timetable was devised to offer certainty in uncertain COVID-19 times
- **Knowledge sharing:** Course content was uploaded to Moodle (the University VLE) on the same day every two weeks with consistent format of each upload. Live interactive webinars were delivered at the same time on the same afternoon every two weeks. Webinars were recorded on MS Teams and uploaded onto the relevant Moodle section for those unable to attend, those that had internet connection challenges, where their personal situation made attendance difficult, or where they wished to watch it back for consolidation of learning
- **Learning processes and relationship building:** Weekly one-hour check-ins were held on Wednesday evenings at 8:00pm. The check-in time was agreed following student consultation so that children would be in bed and parenting students would be free to engage. Check-ins were recorded on Microsoft Teams and uploaded to Moodle as noted above. The Microsoft Teams App was used for seamless communications between the course team and the students and for peer-to-peer communication
- **Student Support:** Keeping student needs at the centre, students were invited to contact any member of the course team as required via email, telephone and

weekly check-ins. The e-moderator was the first point of contact although all members of the course team engaged in student support. Figure 3. outlines the Online Delivery Model



*Figure 3. Online Delivery Model for the PGPDV Course*

### **Student Feedback**

Through regular student feedback, students were directly involved in the redesign of the course. For this article, the feedback was augmented by detailed interviews with small student groups. The feedback, with verbatim comments, is documented in the following.

- a. Online model: The students had not originally applied for a fully online course. Therefore, their mixed feedback is understandable.

‘The recordings were very important particularly when we had wi-fi issues’.

‘The Moodle site is difficult to navigate – wrecks my head at times trying to locate a particular file’.

‘The structure of putting up the readings on Moodle bi-weekly on a Monday evening was clear. It should be there from the start’.



‘Adding an online element will add to the experience of the course in a positive way’.

‘If I had known it was all going to be online [...] I would have waited until the next round’.

Course add-ons such as recording webinars and check-ins assisted students.

- b. Values: The notion of ‘quality assurance in action’ was confirmed in the interviews.

‘The way the course responded to the lockdown was quality assurance in action [...] we moved from what we had planned, and we put an emergency plan in place to keep going. I thought it was very transformative’.

- c. Support: When students are at the centre of course delivery, support cannot be compromised. Student feedback suggests that the course team delivered excellent student support. Seventeen course students completed the course fulfilling all course requirements; two students deferred for health reasons, and will complete in 2021.

In response to a mid-term review question: ‘How would you rate the support to you as a student?’ 100% of respondents rated it ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’.

‘In terms of support it was fantastic given that everything had to go online’.

‘I felt it didn’t matter any hour, any day, or over the weekend, that one of you was there if there were any problems specially around the technology or around the readings’.

‘I think you are all fantastic because you were so available [...] 24/7 and whether it was a Sunday or whatever and I really appreciate it that I think that was remarkable’.

- d. Engagement: Knowles (1984) notes that adults are ‘problem-centered in their orientation to learning’ (p.48) and learn best with the facilitation of a group process (p.102). While group-work is an excellent means of solving problems extensive small group-work was not possible during online delivery. The

breakout room facility was not available on Microsoft Teams at that time. Additional apps for group interaction would require additional work from students who were already time-poor and was unrealistic. While a breakout room tool is now available on Microsoft Teams, the course team used Teams sub-channels for group engagement. Check-ins in particular enabled some small group-work.

‘The check-ins weren’t planned as part of the programme, but they proved to be very beneficial.’

‘Small groups online make it easier to join a conversation – smaller groups allow the conversation to develop faster.’

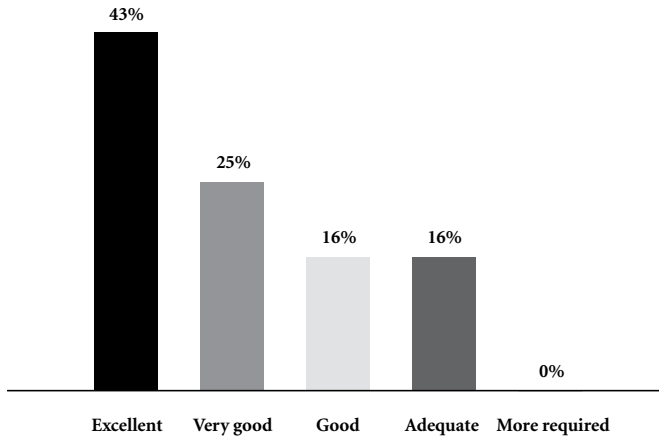
- e. **Relevance:** 68% of student feedback suggests that course content was of excellent or very good relevance to the student learning needs of this group. The excellent retention and completion indicate the relevance of the course. This is in keeping with Knowles’ (1984) assertion ‘that adults are most interested in learning things that have immediate relevance.’
- f. **Learning from experience:** Students said the course process was an experience of ‘walking a mile in our learner shoes.’

‘A direct face-to-face course actually turned out to be an online programme and I thought that that was amazing.’

‘We’re all the generation of digital immigrants rather than digital natives – that has had an impact – we are doing the best we can really.’

‘If we had known then what we know now about digital interaction it would all have been a lot easier.’

How would you rate the knowledge on programme design you have gained thus far/Mid-stage?



This student group learned programme design during the course, but they also learned how to learn online through this experience. We are all much more ICT proficient now than we were in March 2020, agreeing with Knowles' principle that 'adults learn better from experience'.

The request from students to 'pause' the course provided much needed breathing space and time for a more considered approach to the new situation. For the course team, the work involved in creating a fully online course was extensive and unexpected. As workloads mounted so did stress and anxiety about the quality of the course in this new format. However, the feedback cited above is confirmation that the pivot was successful and that adult education values apply in online delivery.

### **Virtual Learning Platforms (VLEs) for Knowledge Transfer/Sharing**

Online delivery required consideration of VLEs to support course delivery. The e-moderator explored various software options. On occasion, the course team used Zoom as the bandwidth usage was more favourable than experience with Microsoft Teams, facilitating easier access by both staff and students with poor internet connection. Mentimeter and Padlet was used for feedback during the course. The course team used PowerPoint with voiceovers and videos, podcasts, and pre-recorded interviews relevant to course content. In the original course design the course team planned to use PowerPoint with voiceovers and/or video for knowledge transfer to complement in-class face-to-face interactive and dialogical interaction. Additional technologies used were helpful for dialogue

though feedback suggests they were not an authentic in-class experience. However, the check-ins, webinars and workshops worked well in the emergency circumstances.

### **Relationship Change**

The most dramatic change in moving the course fully online was the change in relationships. In adult education courses offered by MUDACE and FESS, facilitating student groups to develop relationships with each other is a key goal. These relationships sustain students through the course and often lead to friendships that survive long after the course. In this way, groups form networks of support that could be loosely called micro-communities of practice. The possibility for building group relationships was hampered in fully online delivery but two-thirds of the course members reported forming learning groups. We know from feedback that this group developed a strong bond. The extent to which this was because they met on two occasions before the COVID-19 lockdown deserves more examination.

### **Conclusion**

This article describes how the PGPDV course team successfully pivoted a blended learning course to full online delivery because of COVID-19. In redesigning the course to online delivery, the course team applied Knowles' (1984) principles of how adults learn to the delivery method. Throughout the delivery of the pilot course, students and the course team struggled to maintain competing priorities of work and home life within the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The article shows that the course team, in partnership with the students, were able to successfully pivot a blended learning course to online delivery by rethinking timetabling, modes of knowledge sharing and approaches to student support. While some aspects were lost, student feedback on the experience is very positive because the online design was grounded in best adult learning practice. As online learning is now mainstream, experience for online delivery and learning are an important research resource.

### *References*

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