

Document Title	MCAST QA Policy and Standards for Online Teaching, Learning and Assessment			Page 1 of 8	
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Document Title	MCAST QA Policy and Standards for Online Teaching, Learning and Assessment			Page 2 of 8	
Document Number	020	Document Revision	A	Date Issued	10/11/20

Contents:

1. Introduction

2. Educational Standards for Online Quality Teaching, Learning and Assessment

2.1. General standards for e-learning

2.2. QA Compliance standards for full or partially online (blended) online courses

3. Technological Standards for Online Quality Teaching, Learning and Assessment

3.1. Provision of hardware, software and infrastructure

3.2. The official MCAST tools: Moodle VLE and Office 365

4. NCFHE Standards and Guidelines

1. Introduction

MCAST is embarking on a longer-term EdTech initiative ([see https://www.mcast.edu.mt/wp-content/uploads/MCAST-EdTech-Operational-Framework.pdf](https://www.mcast.edu.mt/wp-content/uploads/MCAST-EdTech-Operational-Framework.pdf)) for the gradual introduction of a full blended learning methodology across all MCAST programmes.

The basic concept is for MCAST programmes to rest fully within a virtual learning environment (VLE), and for the teaching and skilling component of each programme to be carried out in a pre-designed merge of physical interventions and learning online, supported by virtual & augmented reality. This will tackle more than just knowledge transfer, also going into the skills and competences that vocational students require.

This document is a step towards the implementation of this initiative as it will provide standards and guidelines to MCAST Management, Academics and non-Academics (e.g. the IT Department and administrative staff) accordingly.

Furthermore, this document is being implemented within the framework of the MCAST Regulations, Policies and Procedures and the Collective Agreement for Academic staff already in place.

2. Educational Standards for Online Quality Teaching, Learning and Assessment

2.1 General standards for e-learning

- a) Online learning can take place synchronously or asynchronously under the supervision of the assigned academic/s. In asynchronous learning, the engagement between students and the academic is not live but done through communication tools such as an online forum, email and other messaging systems.
- b) Both students and academics shall receive adequate and timely educational support to maximise the use of e-learning tools and opportunities.

Document Title	MCAST QA Policy and Standards for Online Teaching, Learning and Assessment			Page 3 of 8	
Document Number	020	Document Revision	A	Date Issued	10/11/20

- c) Academic staff are required to avail themselves of the MCAST intranet maintenance request portal for logging their request for IT support http://eportal.mcast.edu.mt/Main/Pages/Maintenance_Request.aspx
- d) Academics shall be entitled to Continuous Professional Development on the educational, technical and administrative aspects of delivering courses online.
- e) Academics are not expected to provide first-line technical support to their students while delivering e-learning. However, academics should strive to help students in using e-learning tools if the academics feel they have the necessary knowledge and competence to do so. This will facilitate the smoother running of e-learning teaching and learning sessions.
- f) Academics and students are expected to behave professionally in all aspects of digital communication and e-learning, in line with the MCAST rules and regulations (Doc 038 'Student Conduct and Regulations) and the Laws of Malta.
- g) Academics are expected to enforce acceptable behaviour from their students in e-learning and to report to the relevant authorities within MCAST any such failure from students (Doc 188 'College Academic and Student Board Procedures').
- h) Online attendance by students is obligatory and shall be recorded.
- i) Academics shall respond to the students' online communications within a reasonable period of time, that is, academics shall follow up and respond to the student prior to, or within the lecture that follows. It is to be noted that some tasks are created predominantly to encourage peer to peer input, hence the lecturer's role is not necessarily to respond to each individual student but to probe and prompt further discussion.
- j) Time constrained assessments are to be set a 24-hour window but shall have a very specific duration once initiated. For example, students can commence session anytime during the day but are assigned a set-time for completion of the session.
- k) In general, students are encouraged to keep the camera on throughout the online sessions.
- l) The lecturer may, at any time during an online lecture, take steps to verify the actual presence of participants registered for the online lecture

2.2 QA Compliance Standards for delivery of full or partially online (blended) courses

Courses/ lessons with a strong blend of e-learning or 100% online learning need to adhere to the following standards to be considered compliant with Quality Assurance standards.

- 2.2.1 **Instructional design** – an analysis of the learning needs and the use of appropriate strategies and methods to meet them. This includes clear aims and objectives, clear learning outcomes, assessment criteria, assessment strategy and a clear learning process.

Document Title	MCAST QA Policy and Standards for Online Teaching, Learning and Assessment			Page 4 of 8	
Document Number	020	Document Revision	A	Date Issued	10/11/20

2.2.2 Course opening – welcoming learners:

- a. **Accessibility** – the academic gives clear instructions on how to access all elements of the online learning environment.
- b. **Role** – the academic gives clear information about his professional role in the learning environment and the role of the learners.
- c. **Description** – a course description including pre-requisites (if any), learning outcomes, assessment criteria, assessment strategy and what is expected of the learners is also provided in terms of non-guided learning hours (self-study).
- d. **Behaviour** – the learners are made aware of regulations, policies and ethics that govern the course.
- e. **Integrity** – the academic is aware of and adheres to the academic integrity needed to facilitate learning.
- f. **Technical competences** – the learners are made aware of the technical competences needed to successfully reach the learning outcomes.
- g. **Ownership** – the academic gives learners the opportunity to share their own learning goals.

2.2.3 Assessment of learning – determining what the learner has learnt and subsequent accreditation:

- a) **Goals and objectives** – the learners are aware of what is expected of them when they are assessed.
- b) **Strategies** – internally verified, clear, well-defined and measurable assessment of learning outcomes suited to the level of the learners.
- c) **Grading** – grades are given fairly and transparently through appropriate assessment instruments sanctioned by the institution.
- d) **Feedback** – both academic and learners are given the opportunity to provide feedback related to grading.
- e) **Management** – learners have access to their internally verified grades and feedback at all times so that they can track their learning progress.

2.2.4 Interaction and community – the exchanges between academic and learners that build a community that supports teaching and learning:

- a) **Fostering** – the academic welcomes learners and gives them the opportunity to communicate and create an online environment that fosters peer learning and engagement.

Document Title	MCAST QA Policy and Standards for Online Teaching, Learning and Assessment			Page 5 of 8	
Document Number	020	Document Revision	A	Date Issued	10/11/20

- b) **Management** – community building is supported by clear instructions, rules and regulations. While the academic facilitates engagement, learners are invested with the ownership of community building.
- c) **Peer learning** – group work and other activities that foster peer learning are encouraged and structured not only to fulfil the learning outcomes but also to present learners with an opportunity to learn skills and competences that go beyond such outcomes, e.g., digital literacy.

2.2.5 Instructional resources for teaching and learning:

- a) **Provision** – learning materials are either provided by the academic or the learners are given enough time to procure such resources. The difference between compulsory and optional resources is to be made clear.
- b) **Application** – the academic clearly explains how the resources are going to be applied and utilised.
- c) **Entitlement** – the academic makes sure that the resources indicated to fulfil the learning outcomes are open and accessible by all the learners without unwarranted technical, financial or administrative barriers. The use of Open Educational Resources (free of charge) should be encouraged.
- d) **Variety** – learning resources are varied in terms of the multimedia content and multi-modal delivery channels to cater for the different learning preferences of learners.
- e) **Openness** – the academic should give learners the opportunity to suggest their own resources for adoption in the course.
- f) **Academic integrity** – the academic promotes best practice in the use of third party resources, including anti-plagiarism practices and sound academic research/writing practices.

2.2.6 Learner support – learners enabled to achieve their maximum potential:

- a) **Instructional support** – the academic explains his/her role in the process.
- b) **Academic support** – learners know how to access support from the academic staff, the Inclusive Education Unity and the Learning Support Unit to obtain such services as mentoring, advice and other skills that support them in achieving the learning outcomes.
- c) **Technical support** – learners know how to obtain technical support to overcome potential issues in accessing the learning area and achieving the learning outcomes.
- d) **Administrative support** – learners know how to obtain administrative support to overcome potential issues in accessing the learning area and achieving the learning outcomes.

Document Title	MCAST QA Policy and Standards for Online Teaching, Learning and Assessment			Page 6 of 8	
Document Number	020	Document Revision	A	Date Issued	10/11/20

- e) **Psycho-social support** – learners know how to access psycho-social support directly or via Institute Vocational Coordinators, academic staff or Institute management.

2.2.7 Course evaluation – feedback to improve teaching and learning:

- a) Entitlement – The College should give learners the opportunity to provide feedback on the whole learning experience. On the other hand, academics should also be able to provide their feedback within their organisation.

2.2.8 Course closing:

- a) **Assessment** – learners should have access to their internally verified assessment decisions and feedback after the closure of the course via Classter (and/or Moodle). The final grades should be provided within a reasonable timeframe after the closure of the course.
- b) **Resolution** – all pending issues between the academic and the learners are resolved.
- c) **Archiving** – the academic makes sure the course/learning area resources, texts, communication, etc., are backed-up or archived (in line with the institution's access policies) in a safe and secure way.

2.2.9 Instructional design cycle:

- a. **Academic review** – the academic, the Institute Management and Curriculum Department review the course structure and content, the experience gathered, and the feedback provided by the students.
- b. **Technical review** – the academic, with the relevant technical unit in the organisation, reviews the performance of the technical infrastructure used to deliver teaching and learning.
- c. **Administrative review** – the academic, with the relevant administrative unit/s in the organisation, reviews the administrative processes supporting the delivery of teaching and learning.

3. Technological Standards for Online Quality Teaching, Learning and Assessment

3.1 Provision of hardware, software and infrastructure

3.1.1 Technology shall be at the service of teaching and learning in line with the following standards:

- a) **Support** – all the utilised technologies and resources support the achievement of the aims and objectives of the academic and the learning outcomes for learners.

Document Title	MCAST QA Policy and Standards for Online Teaching, Learning and Assessment			Page 7 of 8	
Document Number	020	Document Revision	A	Date Issued	10/11/20

- b) **Centricity** – all technologies and resources used support a learner-centric rather than an academic-centric educational approach. The learners must be in control and technology must assist them in achieving the learning outcomes.
- c) **Openness** – the technical infrastructure used to deliver the teaching and learning is procured and implemented according to open standards and formats that maximise the value for money and the range of options to fulfil the learning outcomes and the academic needs of faculty and learners.
- d) **Authentication** – authentication at different levels (device, software, virtual learning environment, specific course/learning area) should provide access to safe and secure teaching and learning environment with the minimum number of steps possible to access the learning areas.
- e) **Access** – the virtual learning environment/learning area is accessible over different software platforms, browsers and computing devices. The academic provides alternative resources if any of these are not easily accessible for technical reasons related to the special needs of learners.
- f) **Interface** – the user interface and navigation in the learning area is simple enough to be conducive to teaching and learning without the need to possess advanced ICT skills and competences.
- g) **Investment** – the technical requirements of the instructional resources and the virtual learning environment/learning space do not require learners to make any significant new investment in hardware, software and online services to be able to access and use these resources to fulfil the learning outcomes.
- h) **Management** – Rules, regulations and policies at institutional and at learning community level that governs the use of the technological infrastructure supporting e-learning are accessible via the MCAST Website / Intranet site.

3.1.2 MCAST shall provide adequate ICT and Internet infrastructure on campus

3.2 The official MCAST tools: Moodle VLE, Office 365 and Classter

- a) Moodle VLE, Office 365 and Classter are the official tools to deliver e-learning at MCAST from an educational and administrative aspect for all staff and students registered at MCAST. MCAST shall provide an @mcast.edu.mt email address to all registered full-time and part-time students.
- b) MCAST shall provide adequate educational, technical and administrative support for the use of this and other hardware, software and services sanctioned by MCAST.
- c) Academics are welcome to use their own hardware, software and services to attain the learning objectives and outcomes of the courses they deliver. However, MCAST cannot guarantee full academic, technical and administrative support on systems which are not officially in use.

Document Title	MCAST QA Policy and Standards for Online Teaching, Learning and Assessment			Page 8 of 8	
Document Number	020	Document Revision	A	Date Issued	10/11/20

4. National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) standards and Guidelines

The National Commission for Further and Higher Education issues standards and guidelines in delivering all types of learning in Higher Education.

In case of conflict, the interpretation of NCFHE standards in relation to e-learning shall overrule the interpretation of this document. These IQA standards are available here: <https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/services/Documents/QA%20and%20ACC%20Communications/Annex%201%20-%20NQAF%20Standards%20with%20amendments%20to%20cover%20online%20and%20blended%20learning.pdf>

In terms of blended and e-learning, NCFHE has published the following glossary of terms. MCAST is adopting these terms and their definition as published here: <https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/services/Documents/Definitions%20of%20Terms%20in%20Online%20Learning.pdf>

Reference Documents

- Doc 035 : Student Grievance Policy and Procedure
- Doc 038: Student Conduct Regulations
- Doc 044 : Psycho-Social Support Services Policy
- Doc 086 : Internal Verification Procedure
- Doc 055 : Career Guidance Policy
- Doc 188: College Academic and Student Board Procedures
- Doc 248 : LSU Provision of Additional Support Services
- Doc 250 : Provision of IEU Support Services