

## **Promoting Inclusive Assessment: A Collaborative Approach in Donegal ETB**

### **Background:**

In September 2023 Donegal ETB introduced a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) programme at QQI Level 6 in Inclusive Education & Training.

The programme is tailored to offer learners extensive training in effectively supporting other learners from diverse backgrounds. It strives to ensure learners acquire essential competencies for success in inclusive educational environments. However, concerns were raised regarding potential duplication in learning outcomes and assessment methods, particularly over-assessment.

The learners enrolled in the PLC Programme Level 6 in Inclusive Education & Training all come from diverse backgrounds and have varying educational needs. They are individuals seeking to pursue progression and/or careers in educational support roles, such as Special Needs Assistants or Inclusive Education Facilitators. Modules covered in this course include:

- Special Needs Assisting (6N1957)
- Team Leadership (6N1948)
- Work Experience (6N1946)
- Disability Awareness (6N1975)
- Health Promotion (6N2214)
- Mental Health Awareness (6N2209)
- Inclusive Education Practice (6N2226)
- Differentiated Learning & Instruction (6N2225)

### **Challenges Identified:**

A number of challenges were identified throughout the planning stage of introducing this programme. These challenges included;

#### Over-assessment:

- Learners are burdened with multiple assessments across all modules.
- Heightened stress levels among students.
- Potential compromise to the quality of the learning experience.

#### Duplication in learning outcomes:

- Lack of clarity and coherence in educational objectives.
- Indication of overlapping or repetitive content across modules.

#### Alignment issues with QQI module descriptors:

- Risk to the programme's adherence to established standards.
- Concerns for the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the assessment process.
- Concerns about the quality of education delivered to learners.

Ensuring alignment with QQI level 6 module descriptors required ensuring that assessment methods were in line with the specified learning outcomes. Additionally, collaboration with Donegal ETB FET Quality Assurance needed to be developed to validate this process for Internal Verification (IV), External Authentication (EA), and Recognition of Prior Learning purposes, thereby ensuring governance oversight for the QQI award. Assessment procedures, including methodologies and instruments used to evaluate student performance, were scrutinised for their effectiveness and relevance. This included drafting new assessment briefs and developing marking tools, particularly ensuring cross-modular relevance.

#### **Aims:**

The primary objective was to enhance the effectiveness and quality of assessment practices within the programme, aligning them more closely with established

educational standards. This initiative sought to tackle identified challenges comprehensively, aiming to optimise the assessment process for better learner outcomes.

Specific goals included minimising over-assessment to alleviate student workload, refining learning outcomes to ensure clarity and coherence, aligning assessment methods with QQI standards for accreditation, and promoting inclusivity in assessment procedures to effectively cater to diverse learner needs.

### **Approach Taken:**

Establishing a Community of Practice (CoP) involved a collaborative effort among various stakeholders, including dedicated teaching staff from Errigal College, a Quality Assurance Officer from Donegal ETB FET Service, a Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) Coordinator from Donegal ETB and a FET QA Consultant & Education Developer/External Authenticator. This CoP systematically addressed several challenges:

1. **Reduction & Consolidation of Learning Outcomes:** Individually and through collaboration, the CoP reviewed and refined the learning outcomes in each of the eight modules to eliminate duplication and simplify assessment requirements. These revised Learning Outcomes were then compared to the original Learning Outcomes by QA to ensure that course content had not been compromised.
2. **Mapping and Alignment of Learning Outcomes:** Comparisons were made between modules to ensure that common areas were identified at this early stage to reduce the number of Learning Outcomes to be assessed. This mapping and alignment further reduced the requirement for assessment without reducing course content

3. Development of a Teaching and Learning Plan: A detailed plan was devised to guide the execution of teaching and learning activities in accordance with the revised learning outcomes.
4. Implementation of Quality Assurance Measures: Continuous governance and oversight were maintained through a quality assurance overview, validating the assessment process and ensuring compliance with QQI standards.
5. Additionally, the CoP collaborated to craft a Mission Statement and to produce Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcomes (MIPLOs) along with Minimum Intended Module Learning Outcomes (MIMLOs) to guide collective learning across the programme. This comprehensive effort involved the development of clear programme objectives to facilitate integration. Furthermore, it included the formulation of an Assessment Strategy to frame the assessment process comprehensively and the drafting of a projected timetable for collaborative assessment delivery.
6. Following extensive discussions of shared learning outcomes a 'Health Promotion Week' that incorporated collaborative student assessment across multiple modules was introduced. This event was aimed at enhancing physical, social and mental wellbeing, with assessment seamlessly integrated into the experience.

### **Implementation of Health Promotion Week:**

With inclusivity as its cornerstone, the week featured esteemed speakers from various disciplines, including nutritionists, psychologists, therapists, and educators, who shared invaluable insights into fostering holistic health. Additionally, students actively participated in workshops, presentations, and outdoor adventures, fostering teamwork and personal growth. The culmination of Health Promotion Week, celebrated with an outdoor adventure day, served as a vivid reminder of the significance of physical activity, teamwork, and the sheer joy of exploration. As the

week came to an end, participants took the opportunity to reflect on the various activities and insightful presentations, which contributed to their understanding of well-being as part of their collaborative assessment.

### **Outcomes:**

- **Streamlined Assessment Practices:** The collaborative efforts of the CoP resulted in improving assessment methods, reducing over-assessment while maintaining alignment with QQI standards.
- **Enhanced Learning Experience:** Learners benefited from a more cohesive and integrated learning experience, with assessment methods directly linked to learning outcomes
- **Promotion of Inclusive Practices:** 'Health Promotion Week' exemplified inclusive education learning outcomes in action, demonstrating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Assessment was integrated as a fun and engaging component across multiple modules, further enhancing the inclusivity of the event.

### **Reflections:**

While the initiative achieved significant success in addressing the identified challenges and enhancing assessment practices, several reflections emerged:

**What Worked Well:** Health Promotion Week, featuring collaborative student assessment throughout, was a standout success. The week began with informative sessions on nutrition and fitness, followed by energetic Zumba and jive classes. Mindfulness sessions and talks on mental health added depth to the event. Inclusive resources for individuals with disabilities were also highlighted. The outdoor adventure day provided a thrilling conclusion. Overall, Health Promotion Week effectively engaged participants in activities promoting holistic health and well-being.

Biggest Challenges: Overcoming resistance to change and ensuring sustained engagement and commitment from all involved posed significant challenges during implementation. These challenges were compounded by the reliance on established QQI module descriptors and methods developed in our involvement with teaching and learning, Post Leaving Certificates.

### **Improvement Opportunities:**

Continuous assessment practice review and refinement are crucial, integrating feedback from external authenticators, learners, and teachers to ensure alignment with evolving educational standards and best practices.

### **Future Plans:**

Future plans for the initiative include ongoing monitoring and evaluation of assessment practices, further refinement based on feedback and emerging needs, and dissemination of best practices to other educational programmes within Donegal ETB FET Service.

In conclusion, this case study underscores the significance of collaborative efforts in advancing inclusive assessment practices within educational programmes. By prioritising the needs of learners and fostering a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement, the initiative successfully tackled challenges, enriched the learning experience, and promoted holistic well-being. Moreover, the incorporation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles played a pivotal role in ensuring that assessments were accessible to all learners, regardless of their individual abilities or learning preferences. This collaborative approach, exemplified by the establishment of a Community of Practice (CoP), sets a precedent for other educational programmes faced with similar challenges, underscoring the vital importance of prioritising learners' needs to foster both academic success and overall well-being.