



BLENDED LEARNING & ONLINE LEARNING STRATEGY:

2023-2026

OTC – November 2023 (V3.0)

1.0 Context:

The Open Training College (OTC) is a section of St. Michael's House (SMH), Dublin and a third level Institution offering programmes of education and training to staff who work in the disability, health-related, non-profit, community and voluntary sectors nationally. St. Michael's House was established in 1955 and since then has grown to become the largest provider of services to people with intellectual disabilities, and their families, in the greater Dublin region and the third largest provider nationally.

In the early 1990s, St. Michael's House was providing extensive education and training to staff and sought to formalise and accredit the programmes delivered. To this end an application for (nonfunded) designation as a third level educational institution was made to the then Minister of Education. On achieving this designation St. Michael's House set up the OTC in 1992 as the operational mechanism for the delivery of accredited training.

As part of the designation as a third level institute, OTC was required to offer the programmes and training it developed to all staff employed in disability services nationally. To achieve this objective the organisation was innovative in developing a model of delivery based on a distance learning approach, but with significant adult-friendly supports built in. This model is known as the Supported Open Learning (SOL) Model and has been operated successfully by the College since 1992. In 2003, the College introduced online learning into the model to increase accessibility and flexibility for learners.

More recently other educational providers and educational researchers have referred to this model as 'blended learning'. Blended learning is defined as the complementary use of face-to-face teaching, technology, online tools and resources to support and enhance student education.

In 2016, the College's use of this model won an International E-learning Award (IELA) for blended learning.

The Open Training College is committed to delivering programmes with a comprehensive support system that facilitates effective learning. Flexibility and accessibility are key characteristics of any strategy devised to provide learning opportunities for adults. The SOL Model is always evolving to ensure that the flexibility, effectiveness and user-friendliness of the model is optimised. The College recognises that managing learning can be difficult while juggling other commitments; to that end this

model ensures that students are supported to effectively manage their learning through timely supports.

The following figure outlines the Supported Open Learning (SOL) Model, as employed by the Open Training College for **Blended Learning (1992 – Date)**.

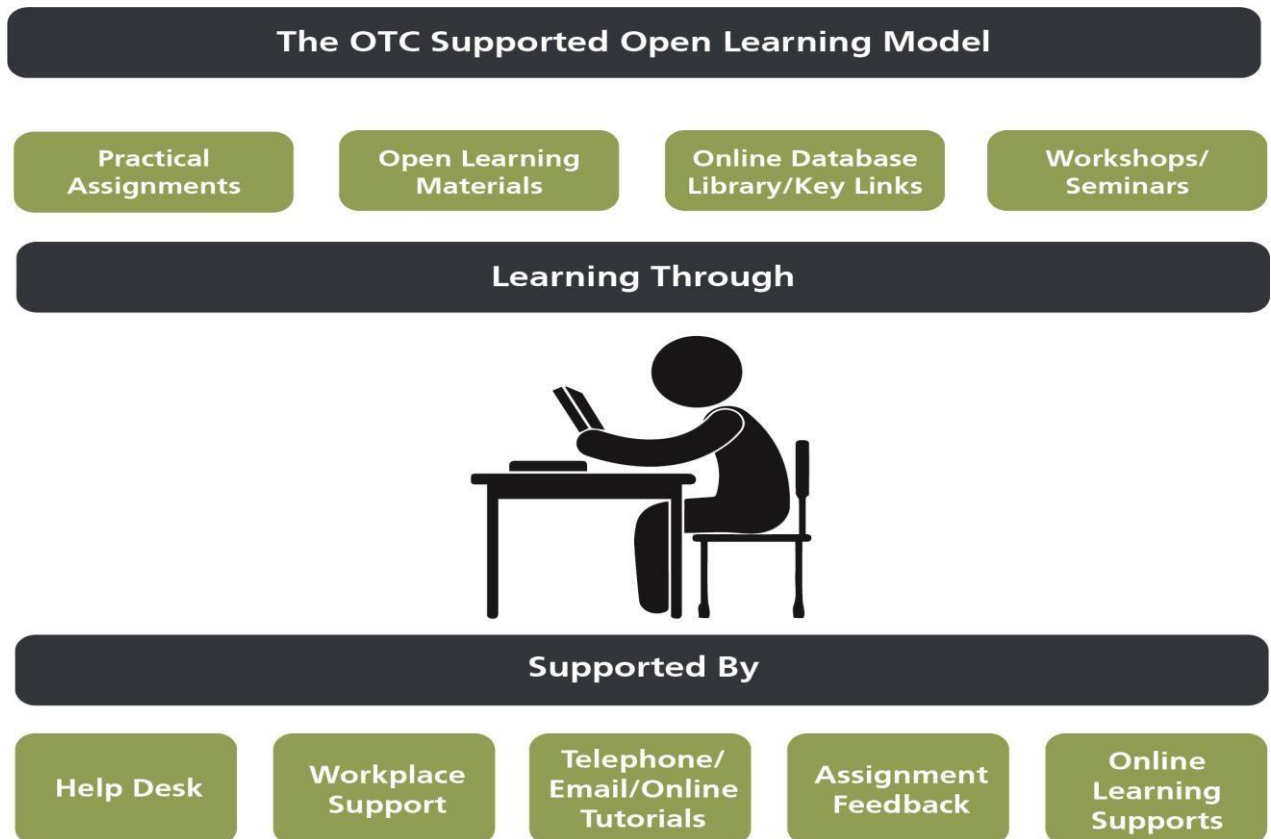


Figure 1: The Supported Open Learning (SOL) Model – **Blended Learning**

The student learns through the following key resources:

Open learning materials;

Online database library;

Workshops;

Practical assignments.

Students are supported in this learning through the following key support structures:

Tutorials;

Feedback (Formative and Summative);

Helpdesk Support;

Relevant and timely feedback; Workplace

Support.

In November 2019, the senior decision-making team of the Open Training College, the College Executive Committee (CEC) met to review the strategic objectives achieved during the four quarters of 2019 and to develop a draft document that would identify the strategic objectives for 2020.

This led to the further development of this strategy, in order to assure the quality of fully online delivery and an adapted version of the College’s successful SOL Model was stipulated.

This is presented here as the Supported Open Learning (SOL) Model – ONLINE Learning (2020 – date):

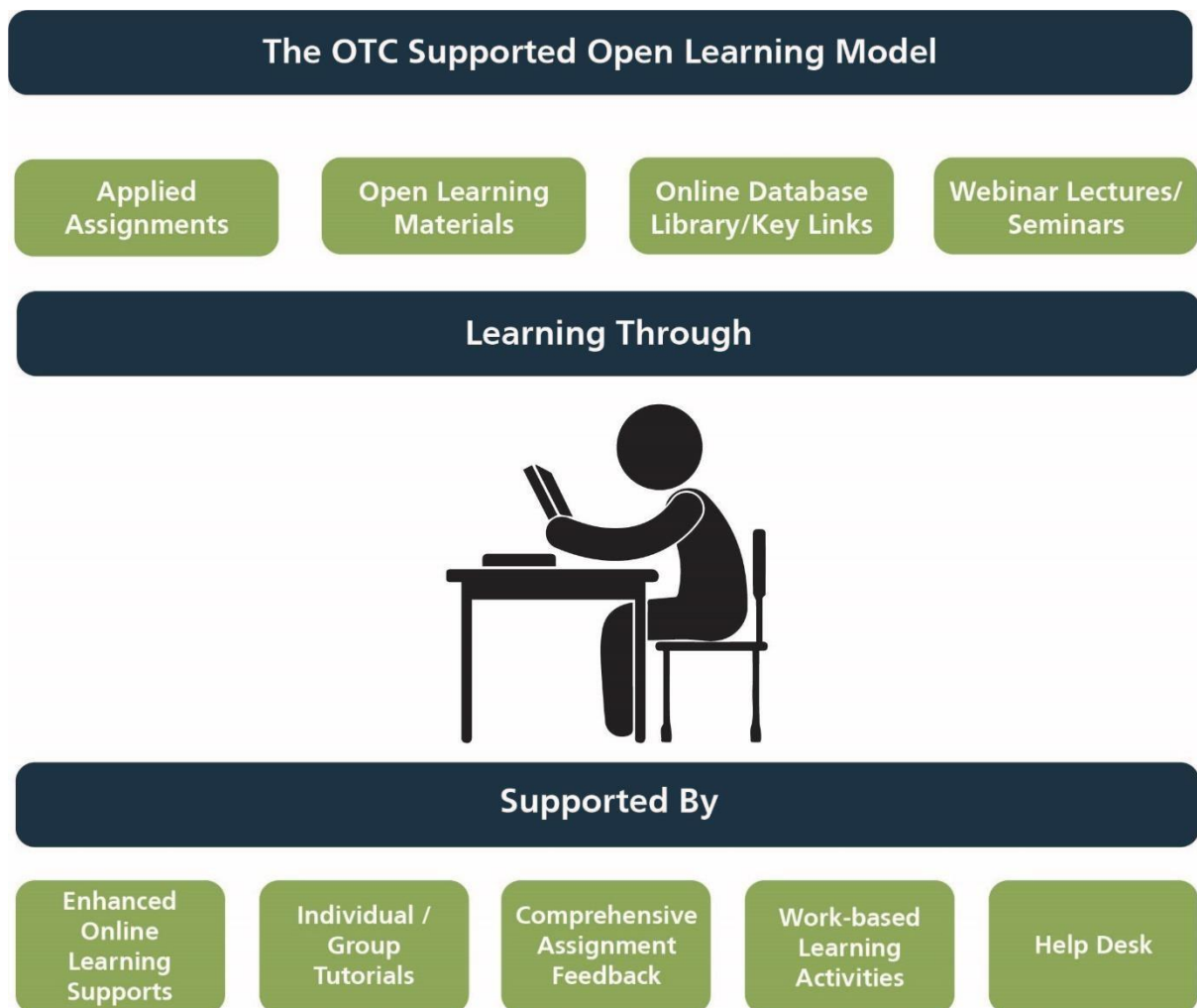


Figure 2: Supported Open Learning (SOL) **Online Model**

The Open Training College’s Supported Open Learning (SOL) Online model is outlined in figure 2 above, the model has two types of elements; the elements the student learns through and is supported by.

The key support for each student in their studies is their tutor. The tutor is an associate faculty member who they can contact throughout their year of study via email, video, telephone or in group tutorials

online. Tutorial supports are provided through a variety of media including telephone, e-mail and online teleconferencing. Any or all of the following areas may be discussed during tutorials:

- student's progress with the learning materials;
- assignment preparation and feedback;
- additional issues that may arise relevant to the learning process.

The student also has access to the E learning team to ask about any online learning or technical issues.

The student commences each module by accessing the online area created specifically to support the identified MIMLOs. The online area provides high quality open learning materials that are regularly updated. The materials are structured to cater to the needs of adult learners, through the provision of separate sections that support each learning outcome. The materials are accompanied by a series of self-directed learning activities. In addition, in the online module area, the student will have access to relevant videos (the College for quality purposes usually uses Ted Talks), podcasts and other multimedia supports. The student will also have access to the assessment brief, rubric and assessment checklist (this document lists all the elements they must complete to ensure the assessment is submitted in its entirety).

The student will also have access to a variety of online areas to have discussions in the community of learning with their peers, lecturers and associates. These discussion areas provide an opportunity to provide valuable formative feedback to the student and the student group. Note participation in some of the online discussion areas may be assessed summatively.

In addition, the College has an online library and databases; online academic writing guide, online how to use MyOTC guide and a study skills area that covers areas like referencing, plagiarism and writing skills.

The student can contact their tutor if they have any questions during the first two weeks. In week three the student will attend online lectures/seminars. These are held in a designated online venue and allow for a lecture style session where knowledge sharing and skill construction is carried out. The students will also complete a variety of small group seminar activities through online break out rooms to explore topic and assessment issues. The online synchronous workshop is recorded for reference purposes and placed on the online platform.

After the lecture/seminars, students continue studying within their online area using the open learning materials. There will be one point when the student can contact their associate for a telephone tutorial

or Zoom call to ensure they have grasped all the essential learning and they are on course for their assessment.

On deadline day the student must submit their assessment in the College style, through Google Drive. There is a dedicated administrative coordinator who ensures that the assessments are submitted on time and in the correct format.

The College provides immediate office hour support on matters related to IT, academic or practice issues. In availing of this support students are provided with immediate access to an experienced member of the faculty who can provide support and guidance to deal with the difficulty they are facing.

Online Learning Community and Socialisation

One of the key barriers to online learning for students is the perception of reduced interaction (Muilenberg and Berge, 2007). The need for a functioning learning community and the creation of opportunities for online socialisation are key (Young, 2010).

The Open Training College bases their online supports on the five-stage model developed by Salmon (1996). For online learning to be successful, participants need to be supported through a structured developmental process. The five-stage-model provides a framework or scaffold for a structured and paced programme of online activities.

The five-stage-model offers essential support and development to participants at each stage as they build up expertise in learning online.

The five stages are outlined below with an indication of the learner's journey in relation to the aims for students; the level of learning community development; and the technology support and online facilitator support focus at each stage. In addition, the key learning analytics required to assess the success or otherwise of each stage are noted.

Stage	Aims of student development at this stage	Learning Community Development	Technology Support for Stage	Online Facilitation support for this stage	Analytics used to ensure supports are working
1 – Access and Motivation	To gain access to the key online areas To be able to use the online areas To start to feel comfortable online To understand netiquette	Commencing. Inducting the student Creating opportunities for first online peer to peer links To emphasise netiquette and what happens if it is not followed	Online orientation course Identification of software/hardware needs Identifying where the student can get technology support	Introduction to online facilitator/tutor Initial activities to ensure Individual emails, phone calls if a student is having issues Checking in after week 1 to ensure the students are comfortable, gaining feedback	Student tracking of initial activity completion Student time online Student engagement with icebreakers Identify any netiquette issues
2 - Online Socialisation	To commence networking peer to peer Commence learning activities Start interacting with other students through a variety of media	Learning community starts to focus on activities linked to the knowledge construction; Bridges built based on common goals and backgrounds are encouraged	Students are supported to interact in a number of ways through a number of online activities	Student peer to peer interactions are encouraged. Feedback is provided on the student's engagement with the learning activities. Students who are not interacting effectively are provided with 1:1 support and linked in with other students.	Student participation in online discussions Students completion of online activities Number of peers each student dialogues with
3 - Information Exchange	To cooperate on online tasks Identify what areas of their own study they need	Learning community is producing relevant focussed knowledge based on	Support is provided on ensuring the student is maximising their use of their online	The online facilitator is supporting the students to maximise their use of the online software.	Discussion types, engagement measured. Amount of personalisation of software

Stage	Aims of student development at this stage	Learning Community Development	Technology Support for Stage	Online Facilitation support for this stage	Analytics used to ensure supports are working
	<p>online support Increase their peer to peer dialogue Students starting to personalise and develop more advanced ways to use the online supports</p>	<p>peer to peer activity.</p>	<p>software through personalisation and using it to support their progress in the module.</p>	<p>Weaving of online discussions provide the learner with an opportunity to develop the knowledge they have created</p>	<p>Engagement with databases, library area Questions to tutor</p>
<p>4 - Knowledge construction</p>	<p>Student should now be an integral member of the online learning community Able to use their online learning to develop the knowledge required Engage with multiple peers on the areas they want to develop</p>	<p>Learning community is functioning as a key knowledge construction area with maximum peer involvement and engagement</p>	<p>Support to access further software, including advanced databases / library searches</p>	<p>The online facilitator is ensuring that the students are meeting their assessment requirements and capturing any other knowledge construction that may be professionally or academically useful. Each student gets an opportunity to present their key findings and gets feedback from peers and online facilitator.</p>	<p>Number of discussions held. Number of threads from each discussion. Activities completed. Requests for further support.</p>

5 - Development	The student captures their learning effectively. Has an opportunity to reflect on	The learning community is ending. The learner leaves the community bringing the	Provides links to further online skill development opportunities, internal or	The online facilitator wraps up the learning community with a feedback session, and provides an opportunity for	Overall view of engagement through discussion, activity completion, student
Stage	Aims of student development at this stage	Learning Community Development	Technology Support for Stage	Online Facilitation support for this stage	Analytics used to ensure supports are working
	the process identifying what all stakeholders did well, needs to improve	skills and knowledge they have developed.	external to the College. Gets feedback on supports, helpdesk.	students to present their key learning from the process.	completion, requests for deadlines. Survey on the experience for all stakeholders.

Modular learning

The College employs a modular approach to learning. Modules are made up of:

- Clearly defined modular learning outcomes
- Learning objectives
- An introduction to the material
- A summary of material
- Activities that engage with the material
- Opportunities to practise, apply, analyse, synthesise new information, including the ability to link with practice-based examples
- Opportunities to reflect and articulate acquired knowledge
- Opportunities for formative feedback
- Additional resources for students to extend their learning
- A clear assessment opportunity contained within a defined area
- Identification of academic issues early in the learning process, rather than with some semesterised models where most assessment is at the end of a defined period

There are distinct advantages to modular learning. These include:

- Modular learning allows for better evaluation and more focussed revision and improvement.
 - Flexibility in relation to delivery.
- Ability to provide a spiral curriculum, where students meet recurring themes in each module building on their expertise on each topic at each juncture. For example, in this programme the student continually engages with the theme professional development in key modules at each stage.

Comprehensive Feedback (Formative and Summative)

The College allows for a number of key checkpoints during each module for formative feedback for each student. These include tutorials, online activities, open learning materials activities, peer discussion, online and in the classroom, and engagement with online supports like referencing quizzes. The student is provided with comprehensive feedback for each summative assessment that allows them to see how their assessment rated against the assessment requirements. In addition, the student is provided with an annotated version of their assessment with feedback comments from the marker.

Programme learning environment

The programme learning environment includes:

1. Synchronous eLearning (Webinars for lectures, seminars, small group discussions, tutorials)
2. Asynchronous directed eLearning on MyOTC
3. Online supports and learning activities
4. Individual and group tutorials
5. Online Library/Databases

1.1 Guiding Principles

The Open Training College has operated under the influence and direction of a number of guiding principles when designing, implementing and evaluating blended learning:

- **Programme-focused rather than technology led:** All blended learning approaches which support learning and enhance the student experience at the Open Training College should be utilised to support learning rather than being used because the technology is available.
- **Educationally appropriate:** Technology intervention should be curriculum focussed and aligned to the learning strategy. Approaches should be consistent with current educational literature and described in appropriate documentation such as specifications and reviews.
- **Optimising contact time:** Each element of the blended model should be used to its maximum effect; namely the online supports should mainly focus on conceptualisation and contextualisation of ideas, while focus on skill construction should mainly be the focus of classroom time.
- **High quality content:** All digital learning materials, whether produced internally or sourced from external open educational resources (OERs), should be relevant and fit for purpose.
- **Available, Responsive and Accessible:** All tools and digital materials should be designed with mobile technologies in mind, normally made available ahead of time and be usable on multiple device types.
- **Skills development:** All students and tutors should be supported to develop the required skills to be able to use any online resource effectively and efficiently.
- **Online experience:** Each online experience should:
 - be consistent (laid out in a similar way to increase intuitive use of the online resources),
 - be clear (expectations of any online engagement should be communicated from the start, with supports available to deal with any issue that arises),
 - offer variety (each programme should have a range of online supports to support the learning),
 - provide feedback (there should be opportunities for the student to provide feedback on a regular basis).
- **Community of Learning:** Each programme should be constructed to enhance the community aspect of learning including the provision of online facilitators and opportunities for online socialisation and collaboration.

Please see Appendix 1 for a more detailed 'explanation of blended learning' at OTC.

Through this Blended Learning and Online Learning Strategy, and its future iterations, we look forward to the realisation of a teaching, learning and assessment delivery which provides optimal outcomes for our student body, their employers, service users and all other internal and external College stakeholders.

2.0 Themes:

Overarching: A fundamental tenet of OTC's Blended Learning and Online Learning Strategy will remain that it addresses, and will continue to update accordingly with reference to, all relevant publications from the College's accrediting body, QQI, with regard to blended and/or online criteria and guidelines, for as long as the College continues to have its programmes validated by that body.

In this regard, the most pertinent and current publication is QQI's "**Topic Specific Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes**" (QQI, October 2023).

In addition, the current Blended Learning and Online Learning Strategy will also always be referenced against best national and international practice in this sphere. Based on the QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes 2023, there are three principal headings; namely organisational context, programme context including development and assessment; and learner experience context. The themes are listed under these three headings.

Organisational Context

1. Strategy, Management and Implementation Plans
2. Policies, Regulations and Administrative Processes
3. Finances, Infrastructure and Resources
4. Staff Training, Professional Development and Institutional Support
5. Strategic Collaborations and Partnerships
6. Learners Outside of Ireland

Programme Context

7. Programme Outcomes
8. Approval and Validation Processes
9. Learning and Curriculum Design
10. Learning Resources and Materials
11. Assessment and Feedback Practices
12. Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Learner Experience Context

13. Thinking about Study

14. Learning Support and Development

15. Equity of Opportunity

16. Learner Experience and Outcomes

3.0 Strategic actions: 2023-2026:

The strategic actions for 2023-26 are listed under the relevant theme headings as follows:

Organisational Context

1. Strategic plan

To update the strategic plan based on the QQI 'Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes', 2023, including in the plan a move to fully online by 2026.

2. Statement and Criteria for Identification of Mode of Delivery

Develop clear statement and criteria to inform decision making on the appropriateness of mode identified for new programme delivery.

3. Align College documentation with Digital Education Guidelines

Build new Blended and Fully Online Guidelines into the College's pedagogical framework and Quality Assurance documentation.

4. Accessibility

Develop templates and accessibility requirements for digital material and learning resources.

5. Infrastructure and Resources

In consultation with our online providers, to investigate further efficient and effective ways to deliver blended and online learning, in particular in the areas of lecture capture and online collaboration.

6. Learner identification

Develop robust arrangements to confirm identity of learners including multi factor identity verification.

7. Environmental Impact

Build an environmental impact of digital tasks and platforms into the new strategy identified in Point 1.

Programme Context

8. Rationale for modes

In developing new programmes and developing current programmes factor in a rationale for the mode of delivery based on the criteria identified in point 2.

9. Accessibility

In developing the curriculum consider the most appropriate and fit for purpose digital learning materials and resources including the consideration of accessibility and the potential use of open education resources.

10. Equivalency

Develop an EDI and Accessibility Policy for programmes to ensure the principle of equivalency in all programmes.

11. Student centred

To maintain evaluation of all online modules as per College procedure, collate response and implement identified need and opportunities for improvement through the E learning Team.

12. Assessment rigour

To benchmark the OTC practices against other blended and online learning programmes and create an action plan to update processes, including the use of proctored online examinations.

13. Regular evaluation

To look at mechanisms for gaining feedback on blended and online learning programmes and identify a more responsive model to capture learner feedback while they are learning as well as the current end of programme/module evaluation.

14. Programme resourcing

Develop costing and risk assessment models for blended and online learning programmes within the College.

Learner experience context

15. Time commitment

All College information to contain the time requirements for each mode of delivery within the blended or online learning model.

16. Learner Responsibility

Develop steps to assist every learner to understand their responsibility to actively engage with all online learning opportunities.

17. Assessment requirements

To develop the students understanding of the pros and cons of using artificial intelligence in developing their assessments.

18. Support service availability

Look at providing a FAQ section to deal with any issues and evaluate its effectiveness.

Appendix 1: Explanation of Blended Learning

The Open Training College's Blended Learning Supported Open Learning (SOL) Model.

The blended learning model utilised by the College ensures that students have optimum opportunity to enhance their learning through a targeted mix of materials, exercises, interaction, study, discussion, skills demonstrations and skills application/practice across the two main instructional platforms:

- **Online** (Module specific material, quizzes, readings, exercises, directed e-learning)
- **Face-to-face** (Presentations, lectures, workshop, skills demonstration, skills practice, discussion, group activities, feedback, guidance on assignment completion)

A hard-copy booklet of core materials is produced for each module and is fully available, in softcopy, for students to download/print within the dedicated online environment for that particular module.

In brief, the student studies module reading materials before attending a face-to-face workshop, which allows for greater exploration of the learning outcomes attached to the target module and for a more practical approach to the acquisition of requisite skills, where appropriate. Formative feedback is a prominent part of the model across both platforms. The online environment allows for directed interaction with material and for the tracking of student progress, as well as for online discussions and development of points/questions raised. The workshop environment allows for greater application of skills and the opportunity to share the learning experience more directly with classmates, tutors and expert presenters, on the way to combining knowledge and skills in achieving full competency.

Ultimately, the learner is formed through the convergence of multiple elements, which include:

- Face-to-face presentations
- Workshops
- Online learning
- Assessment of learning outcomes
- Assessment as learning
- Peer interaction and feedback
- Formative and summative feedback on tasks/assignments from teaching staff
- The learning of theory
- The application of skills
- The building of competence and confidence
- Self-directed learning
- Directed e-learning
- Triad work
- Personal development and integration
- Tutorials
- Application of theory to work-based case studies
- Reflection
- Debate
- Awareness of professional standards, relevant policy and legislation

- Research skills and their application
- Partnership and collaborative approaches
- Supported Open Learning (SOL)

The student commences the programme by accessing the online area created specifically to support the identified MIMLOs for each module. The online area provides high quality open learning materials. The materials are structured to cater to the needs of adult learners, through the provision of separate sections that support each learning outcome. The materials are accompanied by a series of self-directed learning activities (to test the student's understanding of the materials). Also in the online module area, the student will have access to links to key documents, relevant videos (the College often uses Ted Talks), podcasts and other multi-media supports. The student will also have access to the assessment brief, rubric and assessment checklist.

The student will have access to a variety of online areas in order to undertake discussions within the community of learning with their peers, lecturers and associates. These discussion areas provide an opportunity to provide valuable formative feedback to the student and the student group. Facilitated online discussions are used primarily to build knowledge and contextualise issues; some online discussions are assessed.

In addition, the College has an online library and databases; online academic writing guide, online 'how to use MyOTC' guide and a study skills area that covers areas like referencing, plagiarism and writing skills.

The student attends for face-to-face presentations in a designated venue and this allows for a workshop style session where knowledge sharing and skill construction is carried out. Students will also complete a variety of small group seminar activities to build skills and explore topic and assessment issues.

Each student is supported in their studies through a tutor (maximum 15 students per tutor) who they can contact throughout their time of study via email or in group tutorials online. Tutorial supports are provided through a variety of media including, telephone, e-mail, online and face-to-face methods. Any or all of the following areas may be discussed during tutorials:

- The student's progress with the learning materials
- assignment preparation and feedback
- additional issues that may arise relevant to the learning process

The student also has access to the E-learning team to ask about any online learning or technical issues.

After the lecture/seminars/workshops, students continue studying within their online area using the open learning materials. There will be a point when the student can contact their tutor for a telephone tutorial to ensure they have grasped all the essential learning and they are on course for their assessment.

On deadline day the student must submit their assessment in the College style, through their Google Drive. There is a dedicated administrative coordinator who ensures that the assessments are submitted on time and in the correct format.

The College provides immediate office hour support on matters related to IT, academic or practice issues. In availing of this support students are provided with immediate access to an experienced member of the faculty who can provide support and guidance to deal with any difficulty they may be facing.