Quality Assurance Handbook PART A1

POLICY No.23: Apprenticeship Programme development

23. Purpose of policy

This policy provides a consistent, high-level framework and ten-step procedure for the creation and approval of new apprenticeship programmes. It also details arrangements for the review of existing programmes under FIT's remit as National Coordinating Provider. It considers programme design parameters for apprenticeship programmes that utilise blended modes of delivery. FIT's programme development complies with the requirements of awards placed on the National Framework of Qualifications, along with related polices, statutory guidance and procedures published by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the National Apprenticeship Office (NAO).

23.1 Policy scope

All programme development initiatives for which FIT has responsibility are in line with the requirements of FIT's Board of Directors, whose members account for most of the membership of FIT's Employer Consortium. The board is a mandatory, formal, and employer-led industry-focused coordinating entity that ensures that the voice of employers in the tech sector is sufficiently considered in apprenticeship development activities.

Apprenticeship provision, by its nature, requires the effective coordination of several stakeholders, in this context including, but not limited to, FIT as Coordinating Provider, the

Employer Consortium, and individual employers who participate in the development and deployment of apprenticeship programmes. Additionally, the Education and Training Boards, which act as approved off-the-job collaborative providers, and the pertinent regulatory agencies, have critical roles in apprenticeship provision. Accordingly, this policy will set out the steps required for the successful and rigorous development of a programme of apprenticeship, along with attendant approval and review processes. The roles and responsibilities of the relevant stakeholders required to approve the various stages of a programme's development will also be set out in detail.

23.2 Overarching considerations

FIT's programme development and approval steps are undertaken in compliance with QQI's programme validation requirements. Programme validation is a structured process that ensures that FIT's apprenticeship provision meets all regulatory and stakeholder requirements while maintaining the highest rigour in delivery and academic standards. Specifically, this policy reflects QQI's statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Apprenticeship (2016) and its Policies and Criteria for the Validation of Programmes of Education and Training (2017). Separately, the National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) clearly delineates ten main steps required when developing a national apprenticeship, from the initial proposal to launching the programme with employers and apprentices. Although the steps are not always undertaken by FIT in a linear sequence.

23.3 Policy statement

FIT is responsible for all internal quality assurance matters related to the provision of apprenticeships under its remit. It is committed to ensuring that all new programmes are developed and approved in line with current strategic priorities, as set out in FIT's published Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Strategy 2026–2030, that these priorities are financially viable, meet the required academic and/or professional standards, and are developed

following a rigorous process which includes consultation with internal and external stakeholders. Following the initial programme development steps and programme review arrangements set out in this policy, FIT ensures that the standards of its apprenticeship programmes will be appropriate to the award level, or above, with which they are associated.

23.4 FIT's Programme Development team

Within FIT's Tech Apprenticeship organisational structure, its remit as the National Coordinating Provider encompasses four functions: Quality Assurance and Registry, Apprenticeship Experience, Employer Onboarding, and the Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Unit. Under the direction and guidance of FIT's Director of Academic Affairs and Programme Development, twelve to fourteen employees carry out the four functions of programme development and subsequent review activities. Separately, FIT's Board of Directors comprises the Apprenticeship Employer Consortium, along with other apprenticeship-centric governance entities including the Academic Council and Programme Board. Together, their collective insights actively drive programme development, and they liaise, where necessary, with a broad church of potential employers and with related parties involved in the validation and review of an apprenticeship programme.

23.5 Ten-step Apprenticeship Programme development procedure



Figure 1—FIT's ten-step apprenticeship development procedure

FIT's formal programme development encompasses a series of inter-related, iterative activities that produce well-considered and employer-informed programme validation documentation that is subsequently submitted to QQI. Table 1 (below) documents how FIT interprets and manages the NAO's ten-step procedure.

Step 1: ***Initial apprenticeship proposal***	**Aligned stakeholders**
As the Coordinating Provider on behalf of FIT's Employer Consortium, FIT produces a report presenting an initial apprenticeship proposal for consideration by the National Apprenticeship Alliance. A key requirement of this step is to show a substantial skills need within an industry sector(s) that can be met through a national apprenticeship, as well as practical evidence of support by employers for the proposed apprenticeship. In FIT's context, this is achieved by gathering and analysing intelligence from the Employer Consortium, and internal skills audit activities, and by analysis of the national and international labour market outlook, particularly where an apprenticeship offering may serve employers' needs as a sustainable recruitment mechanism. Following the formation of an initial apprenticeship proposal by FIT's Employer Consortium, as part of Steps 5 and 6, FIT will seek the sign-off and approval of both the Employer Consortium and Academic Council. This process will include reviewing and agreeing upon the format of a draft Occupational Profile and the subsequent shape and form of a validation document.	*FIT* *Employer Consortium*

Step 2: *Apprenticeship concept approval*	**Aligned stakeholders**
Upon FIT's submission of an apprenticeship proposal to the NAO, the NAO forwards the application to the National Apprenticeship Alliance for its consideration. The Alliance critically assesses the proposal to ensure that there is no excessive overlap with existing apprenticeships and to confirm that there is sufficient support for the introduction of an apprenticeship in the proposed discipline. Upon notification of approval, FIT proceeds to the development phase.	*NAO* *National Apprenticeship Alliance*

Step 3: *Project plan agreed*	**Aligned stakeholders**
Following approval of an apprenticeship development proposal, the Employer Consortium and FIT begin in-depth programme scoping. FIT prepares a plan for the development of the apprenticeship using the NAO-provided template. FIT's completed project plan is submitted to the NAO for approval.	*FIT* *NAO* *National Apprenticeship Alliance*

Step 4: *Programme and curriculum development*	**Aligned stakeholders**
As the programme development activities advance, FIT completes a draft Occupational Profile that provides insight into the intended NFQ Level of the programme, graduate attributes in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies, and aligned behaviours, as well as additional information on potential progression routes. Unlike programme development activities that do not involve a work-based learning component, draft Occupational Profiles have forward-facing ramifications for the formal validation process of a FIT apprenticeship, as the draft Profiles set out parameters for technical and non-technical knowledge and skills requirements that are further expounded in QQI's programme validation documentation. As such, this part of the process entails the most dialogue with the various partners, the intention being to ensure a robust programme outline and design.	*FIT* *NAO* *Employer Consortium* *Technology Ireland* *Education and Training Boards*

Step 5: *Occupational profile finalisation*	**Aligned stakeholders**
Upon receipt of an Occupational Profile from FIT, the NAO forwards the application to the National Apprenticeship Alliance for its consideration. Upon notification of approval, FIT proceeds to the validation phase of the process.	*National Apprenticeship Office* *National Apprenticeship Alliance*

Step 6: *QQI Programme validation process*	**Aligned stakeholders**
For the purposes of programme validation, FIT, on behalf of the Employer Consortium, prepares a submission that sets out in detail the programme's content and structure and the quality assurance arrangements that will underpin it. In the present context, since there are a number of active FIT apprenticeships, the overarching quality assurance arrangements are in place, having previously been approved by QQI. Accordingly, with respect to the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012 and, on a formal basis, FIT must ensure that: • Established procedures for quality assurance, under section 28 of the 2012 Act, are in place; • Established procedures for access, transfer, and progression, under section 56 of the 2012 Act, are in place; and • Compliance with section 65 of the 2012 Act, in terms of arrangements for the protection of enrolled apprentices, is clearly established. In addition to the provisions noted above, validation documents detail how the programme meets the requirements of the Professional Award Type Descriptor at NFQ Level 6 in FIT's context. Following submission of a programme for validation, an independent panel with industry and apprenticeship expertise is established. The panel assesses the	*FIT* *Employer Consortium* *Quality and Qualifications Ireland*

programme submission and makes a recommendation to the awarding body, QQI. The panel may recommend approval of the entire programme, approval with some modifications, or defer approval pending substantive modifications and resubmission. Following a successful validation process, the apprenticeship programme is approved as part of the national apprenticeship system. Programme validation documentation always includes the following documents: • Main Programme Descriptor document; • Book of sample assessments; • Evaluation of validation criteria; and • Fee cover note.	
Step 7: *Industrial Training Order*	**Aligned stakeholders**
Each national apprenticeship in Ireland, including FIT's suite of Tech Apprenticeships, is a statutorily designated industry activity. This provision is set out in the Industrial Training Act, 1967. An Industrial Training Order, which is a statutory instrument, designates an industrial activity as an apprenticeship. SOLAS is the body responsible for issuing Industrial Training Orders under the 1967 Act and the Further Education and Training Act, 2013. Consequently, FIT furnishes the final Occupational Profile to the NAO for the attention of, and for processing by, SOLAS and the National Apprenticeship Alliance. A completed Industrial	*FIT* *National Apprenticeship Office* *National Apprenticeship Alliance* *SOLAS*

Training Order, should a new one be deemed necessary for a particular apprenticeship programme, is laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas and, subsequently, put on the Irish Statute Book and published in the official Irish State Gazette.	

Step 8: *Programme implementation*	**Aligned stakeholders**
Before launching a new apprenticeship programme, FIT engages with the NAO to agree on an implementation plan and an operational budget, which are documented annually in FIT's Funding Allocation Request to SOLAS.	*FIT* *National Apprenticeship Office* *SOLAS*

Step 9: *Apprentice onboarding*	**Aligned stakeholders**
To be approved as a Tech Apprenticeship employer for any of FIT's available provisions, an employer must demonstrate that they have the capacity and ability to provide high-quality and relevant on-the-job training to apprentices for the relevant national apprenticeship programme. Once FIT pre-vets a prospective employer, the employer progresses through a process with FIT that culminates, if successful, in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding and the naming of a Workplace Mentor. After this initial interaction with FIT, the employer is registered as being suitable to onboard	*FIT* *Prospective Employers* *National Apprenticeship Office* *SOLAS*

and train apprentices. These details are recorded by a SOLAS-approved Authorised Officer and noted on the SOLAS National Register of Apprentice Employers.	

Step 10: *New Apprenticeship underway*	**Aligned Stakeholders**
FIT secures the first intake of apprentices, in collaboration with the Education and Training Board partners and Approved Employers, and arranges for on- and off-the-job training to commence at the earliest opportunity.	*FIT* *Approved Employers* *Participating ETBs*

23.6 Considering programme modes of delivery

Every five years, FIT's Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Strategy sets the institutional requirements for the various modes of delivery of apprenticeship programmes under its remit, which is then incorporated into the review and revalidation activities for active programmes and into the initial programme development phase for new apprenticeship programmes. Given the nature of apprenticeship training in the workplace, considerations for differing modes of delivery are only relevant for the off-the-job training elements. In FIT's apprenticeship context, apprenticeship provision includes approximately 75% of training occurring in the workplace, with the remaining 25% spent in an off-the-job, tutor-directed, synchronous format. Irrespective of the chosen mode of delivery for off-the-job programme components, apprentices will always be present with their employer for on-the-job programme elements, either at in-person or virtual workplaces, depending on the employer's preferences and policies, ensuring ready access for the apprentice to their work environment and appointed Workplace Mentor.

During periods when apprentices attend off-the-job, college-based training, a significant number of FIT's apprenticeship intakes will operate based on apprentices' physically being present at an Education and Training Board training location. However, in some instances, FIT may deploy a "blended" model of teaching and learning. With such an arrangement, a programme's training schedule will specify periods of physical attendance at a training location, and significant elements of the programme will be delivered virtually, in a synchronous manner, via FIT's virtual classroom (enabled by vendor solutions from BigBlueButton). marker Within a given calendar year, FIT anticipates that the majority of scheduled intakes will consist of in-person off-the-job delivery methods at a physical training location. From 2027 onwards, the first Academic Council meeting of each calendar year will note the intended delivery mode for each intake of FIT's apprenticeship planned in that calendar year. However, FIT is cognisant of the fact that this cannot be categorically guaranteed due to the diverse factors that impact a scheduled programme's delivery mode. As such, FIT will liaise closely with the Academic Council and Employer Consortium at all times to ensure the ratio of programmes with blended delivery modes to those with in-person delivery modes is appropriate. In practice, if it becomes known during a calendar year that over 50% of planned intakes will use a blended mode, which deviates from the yearly plan, FIT will seek approval from the Academic Council with at least eight weeks' lead time before apprentices commence a given intake. Participating apprentices and all relevant stakeholders will be apprised of the delivery arrangements for a given intake well in advance of the commencement of training.

23.7 Structure of off-the-job training days

Apprentices in training are employed by their employer on a full-time basis, which typically entails 37.5 hours of attendance in the workplace each week to carry out on-the-job training. During periods of off-the-job training, this changes to 31.5 hours per week. These periods of on- and off-the-job training are directly associated with the total apprentice effort required to complete an apprenticeship programme, which is linked to the overarching FET credit attainment allocated to each module across all of FIT's active apprenticeship programmes.

At the design phase of a programme, a tentative delivery schedule is devised and included in the programme validation documentation, detailing the total on- and off-the-job training days applicable to a given programme. Once a programme moves to the implementation stage, FIT drafts a delivery schedule, taking into account the intake start point within the given calendar year.

Regarding periods of off-the-job delivery, regardless of the delivery mode, apprentices will commence training no later than 9:00am from Monday to Friday. Many intakes begin off-the-job training at 9:00am but, in other cases, training can commence at 8:30am. To facilitate commuters using public transport, the formal training day will end no later than 4:15pm between Monday and Thursday and 2:00pm on Friday.

23.8 Virtual classroom considerations (off-the-job training days)

For each programme of education and training running in a blended mode encompassing elements of in-person, face-to-face instruction and virtual attendance, a chosen percentage blend of the two training modes is selected at the point of programme validation. Considering the development of FIT's apprenticeship provisions, the blend relates only to off-the-job training and so can be seen as a "blend within a blend." Section 23.9 provides the basis for the criteria used to approve blended delivery arrangements for an apprenticeship programme.

Where a blended mode is chosen for a particular off-the-job intake, the FIT approach is to ensure that at least 10% of off-the-job training takes place in a physical setting, with the remainder delivered virtually through FIT's virtual classroom, enabled by BigBlueButton. These in-person training days are deemed "anchor" components of off-the-job training due to the opportunities they provide for rich, practical tutor-led learning. While the varied subject matters of FIT's Tech Apprenticeship programmes are well-suited for virtual learning arrangements, particularly given the prevalence of modern-day remote working environments, FIT seeks, at all times, to ensure that practical and hands-on experiences are provided to all apprentices. As such, in-person training days allow tutors to introduce their

apprentices to the physical aspects of computing, to simulate real-world working environments where “analogue” tools such as whiteboards play a crucial role in software development activities, to contrast remote and in-person technical support activities, and so on. All of these activities, and more, can certainly be run in a remote learning environment but added value is undoubtedly found when apprentices and their tutors share a physical space and collaborate accordingly. In this way, FIT remains responsive to the needs of both the Employer Consortium and the apprentices enrolled on the programme, particularly in light of the commuting efforts entailed by these in-person training days. It is imperative that all in-person training days are materially beneficial to apprentices and so FIT’s TEL Unit will work with tutors to ensure that these sessions are engaging, rewarding, and result in the attainment of new skills.

FIT anticipates that Education and Training Boards delivering off-the-job components in their role as collaborating providers may add additional in-person training days based on tutors’ desire to conduct further in-person class activities, as this approach provides flexibility for tutors and supports collaboration and peer learning. However, adding extra in-person training days for a given intake applies only to days already scheduled for off-the-job delivery, reducing the overall number of days utilising virtual delivery via FIT’s BigBlueButton proportionally. Any scheduled off-the-job training days that are changed from virtual to in-person delivery will be notified to apprentices with a fair lead time.

23.8.1 Managing virtual classroom fatigue

During the design phase of an apprenticeship programme, FIT ensures that module-level learning outcomes are achievable for apprentices undertaking off-the-job training in both in-person and virtual classroom environments. Specifically, this is supported by FIT’s digital learning resources repository, which tutors utilise to deliver a particular programme, along with FIT’s pedagogical framework for delivery, which advocates that tutors devise and deploy varied activity types throughout a training day. However, notwithstanding optimal programme design, FIT is aware that apprentices undertaking periods of full-time off-the-job training in the virtual environment can, if not adequately supported, be prone to virtual learning fatigue due to a variety of factors, such as eyestrain, lack of face-to-face interaction,

and sensory overload due to extended participation in digital environments. Whereas FIT's approach to programme design aims to deploy industry-relevant and compelling training content through live synchronous delivery, it is not practical for a tutor to deliver content without providing regular rest breaks to support apprentice information absorption.

At the coalface in the virtual classroom, FIT makes provision for periods during a training day when apprentices are not active or online. In addition to the standard lunchtime break, FIT recommends a minimum five- to ten-minute break for every two hours of training delivered in the virtual classroom. Unless part of a module assessment event, no virtual-delivered class segment should be scheduled for more than 2 hours. Considering FIT's parameters for a given training day, and in line with FIT's programme design efforts, the TEL Unit has devised an example schedule of tutor-led instruction facilitated via virtual classroom. Critically, direct teaching time noted on a schedule should always leverage and intertwine elements of FIT's nominated pedagogical learning framework, the Conversational Framework, and provide apprentices with opportunities to Acquire, Inquire, Discuss, Collaborate, Practice, and Produce throughout each training day.

TEL Unit outline of a typical virtually attended training day		
Daily Outline	***Duration in Minutes***	***Activity Type via FIT's Virtual Classroom***
9:00 am - 10:30 am	90 minutes	Opening questions and direct teaching time
	15 minutes	Short break (off-screen)
10:45 am – 12:30 pm	105 minutes	Direct teaching time
	60 minutes	Lunch break
1:30 pm – 3:00 pm	90 minutes	Direct teaching time
	15 minutes	Short break (off-screen)

3:15 pm – 4:15 pm	60 minutes	Direct teaching time and session recap

23.9 Determining programme suitability for blended delivery modes

Determining programme suitability for a blended off-the-job delivery mode is considered throughout the design phase and into the implementation phase of a new programme. At the programme development design level, FIT's Academic Council, Employer Consortium, and Programme Board, as applicable, will approve new programme proposals that include intent to utilise blended off-the-job training modes. At the operational level post validation, and based upon having blended delivery approval for a given programme, the FIT Registrar will approve given intakes for either a face-to-face or blended mode. The criteria that will inform the decision-making include, but are not limited to:

1. Programme and module-level learning outcomes are achievable through completion of prescribed off-the-job elements delivered via FIT's virtual classroom.

2. Apprentices' occupational proficiency, in terms of knowledge and skills, can be developed through periods of virtual instruction as effectively as in-person instruction.

3. Competencies honed through off-the-job virtual delivery periods are reinforced through supported work-based practice.

4. The programme validation documentation clearly states the intention to deploy off-the-job elements of apprenticeships in a blended mode, in accordance with the parameters and terms set out in this policy.

5. Using FIT's pedagogical framework as a base, off-the-job blended delivery that encompasses elements delivered via FIT's virtual classroom must be intentionally designed with appropriate mapping to available digital learning resources and module-level learning outcomes.

6. Instances of intakes using a blended off-the-job delivery must preserve the identity of the apprenticeship programme and align with the statutory requirements.

7. Clear Terms of Reference delineate responsibilities for FIT's TEL Unit, collaborating providers, tutors, and Workplace Mentors.

8. Module assessments are valid, reliable, authentic, and, importantly, appropriate for use in a blended context. Assessments undertaken remotely by apprentices utilise effective, consistently applied remote invigilation and proctoring approaches.

9. Work-based assessment evidence outcomes have a fair level of compatibility with any assessment undertaken through remote and proctored invigilation arrangements.

10. Any supports or reasonable accommodations available to apprentices in person are also available, where applicable, for any period of instruction delivered through FIT's virtual classroom.

11. FIT informs in situ apprentices of any expectations for off-the-job blended delivery and attendance requirements.

12. Apprentices can access any technical or well-being supports during periods of virtual instruction in the same manner as during periods of in-person instruction.

13. Approved employers ensure release requirements for those undertaking blended off-the-job delivery in the same manner as those attending training in a physical training location.

14. FIT's Learning Management System (LMS) architecture provides simple sign-up and log-in procedures, allowing apprentices to access the virtual classroom (facilitated by BigBlueButton) to attend scheduled training elements.

15. Tutors are encouraged to attend any Tutor Community of Practice sessions to avail of continuous professional development resources and opportunities related to FIT's pedagogical framework and online delivery.

16. Monitoring and review activities associated with off-the-job blended delivery will be data-driven. They will encompass robust comparisons with other modes of delivery,

capture metrics on apprentice engagement, achievement, and progression, and include stakeholder feedback.

17. All FIT apprenticeship provision adheres to the QQI statutory guidance and is auditable and transparent.

18. FIT's suite of quality assurance policies always reflects consideration, where applicable, for blended modes of delivery, with appropriate reference to FIT's underpinning technological infrastructure.

19. Off-the-job blended learning approaches should be guided by FIT's strategic intent, as codified in the active Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Strategy.

23.10 Considering blended programme effectiveness

While various progression and baseline outcome metrics will be presented after programme implementation, a critique of the effectiveness of an active apprenticeship programme will be based on an understanding of delivery in action, aiming to contextualise the presented outcome metrics through all delivery modalities. Notwithstanding this, during the design phase of an apprenticeship programme, it is essential to consider future-facing aspects, including anticipated challenges and probable outcomes. The criteria noted in Section 23.9 outline matters that FIT take into account at the point of programme design which, taken together, document narratives around pedagogical effectiveness, engagement and accessibility, support and feedback, the consideration for diverse learning modalities, and the relevance of learning undertaken in an off-the-job blended mode with work-based practice.

Once an apprenticeship programme under FIT's remit is deployed in a blended off-the-job mode it is continually monitored through reviewing grade outcome and progression data, apprentice surveys, one-to-one interactions, class representative system feedback, and module-end feedback mechanisms. FIT closely tracks ongoing apprentice sentiment and a given cohort's satisfaction with all aspects of programme participation, including specific

questions on their participation in blended modes of delivery and, particularly, the nature of training delivered via FIT's virtual classroom.

To gain a meaningful understanding of apprenticeships in action, FIT's outreach activities centre on the clarity of the module structure, the sequencing of off-the-job online and in-person components, and the integration of aligned on-the-job components. FIT also monitors sentiment on the availability and presentation of digital learning materials, as well as the activity types deployed by tutors delivering the programme on an intake-by-intake basis.

23.10.1 Programme review and revalidation

Once a new apprenticeship programme is validated for delivery through the QQI validation process, programme review processes are initiated and preparation begins for formal revalidation in the future. After a period of no less than three years, and no more than five years unless otherwise agreed with QQI, FIT instigates a formal review of a particular apprenticeship programme. Activities during the formal review period are agreed with QQI with the formulation of Terms of Reference that specify key timelines for, and items of importance to, the review. While this review amounts to an in-depth analysis of an apprenticeship programme, the formal review process is informed by FIT's various evaluative efforts in the years before the review takes place.

Considering the pace of technological change, FIT anticipates that each review period will necessitate and, therefore, include at least some changes to an apprenticeship Occupational Profile, programme and/or module-level learning outcomes, or aligned module-level indicative content and/or assessment. Once the final shape and form of a programme is developed and is signed off on by FIT's governing entities, the appropriate programme revalidation documentation is submitted by the Director of Academic Affairs and Programme Development to QQI.

Once QQI process FIT's revalidation documentation, an Independent Evaluation Panel (IER) is convened to assess the reviewed programme submission. The process includes an initial visit with FIT representatives and a procedure to close out conditions or recommendations made during the process before the rollout of the revalidated programme.

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