Quality Policy

This Policy defines the various mechanisms and practices implemented at STC Higher Education to keep up the quality of services provided by the institution.

STC Quality Policy Document - OEP Last updated August 2023

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1. OVERVIEW OF QUALITY

1.1 Standards within Academia

STC Higher Education was founded in 1997 and was formerly known as the Government Computer Centre. Fourteen IT firms together with the Government of Malta agreed to set up a joint venture company having the mandate to establish an effective and profitable centre of training excellence that would offer whole-life continuation training in the development of IT skills.

At STC we are passionate about teaching and learning. We are also proud of ourselves in being able to transform lives. Our courses offer progression routes right through to a degree or employment. Our aim is to make sure that each student achieves his or her full potential both within and beyond the institute. We therefore work closely with many local and international stakeholders to give the best Higher Education opportunities and experiences possible.

1.1.1 Our Mission

To offer quality education in a safe learning environment to achieve excellence in the world of work.

1.1.2 Our Motto

Learn - Achieve - Inspire is derived from our commitment to teach our students to achieve what they desire and to inspire our scholars to contribute to the overall wellbeing of society.

1.1.3 Our Values

The student is the focal point of all of our activities. STC adopts curricula that motivate and support students to excel while preparing them for the challenges of today's world of work.

We advocate a multicultural point of view on campus thus accepting diversity between local and foreign cultures and traditions. Honesty and integrity are on top of our ethical scale.

1.1.4 Our Commitment

We are fully committed to provide curricula that aim to ensure high standards within the Business and Computing industries. Our students are constantly monitored for progress, absenteeism and behaviour by management and lecturing staff. This enables us to perceive any problems at an early stage and tackle any issues that might jeopardise students' progress.

At STC students receive theoretical knowledge and are provided with practical experiences, thus making them more employable in the world of work.

1.1.5 Recognition

STC is recognised as a quality institution by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA). The aim of MFHEA is to provide accreditation to further and higher educational institutions, as well as to accredit programmes and modules designed and offered in Malta. MFHEA is an affiliate member of ENQA, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Apart from local recognition, all STC partners, being academic or professional, follow a strict quality process to ensure that the service given to students is impeccable.

1.2 STC's approach to quality

The management structure at STC helps in ensuring that quality is portrayed and filtered down in a manageable format across the different departments of the organisation.

1.2.1   Senior Management

Highly trained managers ensure that all policies are adhered to. Business development is pushed forward by senior management in order for STC to retain and broaden positive relationships with partners within the industry.

1.2.2   Academic Leaders

The different departments, Computing and Business, have academic leaders who is designated to ensure that the quality of the programmes, in conjunction with the pertinent awarding body, is maintained. Our academic leaders have extensive academic and professional experience within their area of expertise.

1.2.3   Lecturers

All lecturers at STC have experience in lecturing as well as subject-related qualifications (Level 7 or Level 8). A minimum of a Level 6 qualification is required in order to lecture at Level 5 or lower.

Professional experience is highly valued by STC since this enables lecturers to link the academic content to the professional activity.

Lecturers are also encouraged to keep up with developments in their respective fields and with the methodological requirements of their subjects of delivery. Lecturers have a shared space on campus where informal meetings are held. Bi-annual formal meetings are organised in conjunction with the administration staff, with the scope of ensuring that the teaching and learning activities are up to the standard that STC is renowned for.

1.3 Available Resources

1.3.1   Learning Resources

NCC students are given access to Teams, whereas University of Wolverhampton (UoW) students are given access to Canvas – each VLE provides access to learning material and other digital services that provide further support to the students' academic experience.

1.3.2   Library

The library is designed to provide academic facilities to staff and students at STC. Apart from the physical books, the library also offers a space for students to study in a modern space with all the required facilities. STC library makes use of digital databases to provide further support to its members both on and off-site.

The library has subscriptions, in digital and print format, to some of the most popular publications in business and technology. These magazines are made available to all members of staff for continuous self-development. Students are also encouraged to make use of such resources.

1.3.3   Student Support

A number of services are provided to complement the student experience. Well-being is taken care of diligently thanks to specialised support services provided by the Welfare Officer, such as psychological support and assistance for students with special needs. With regards to academic difficulties, students are encouraged to contact their academic leaders whenever they feel it is required.

1.3.4   IT Infrastructure

IT Support is available to ensure that the institutions' various laboratories and electronic resources, as well as the Wi-Fi network and internet hotspots are maintained and running optimally. Laboratories equipped with modern computer systems are found on premises and are made available to our students and lecturers as required. STC also ensures that lecturers and students are given all the necessary IT-related support.

Each student is provided with a private and unique email username@stcmalta.edu.mt which is used to log into MySchool to access important information such as the class schedule, assessments, and results. This email is also used to log onto Microsoft Teams. Students are advised that regular monitoring of their STC email inbox is required due to this being the official medium of communication for the Institution – any announcements and important notices are sent to students' STC email addresses.

2.   QUALITY PROCESSES

2.1 Academic Programme Reviews

Information from teaching staff as well as students, through the administration of surveys and annual feedback sessions taken care of by external professionals, is passed on to the academic partner. Students also have the possibility to provide feedback during student council meetings as well as during the formal study board meetings.

Course leaders are engaged in communication with staff from the different awarding bodies (NCC and UoW) and discuss issues and suggest improvements that can be made to the current programmes. The aim of these meetings is to constantly improve the quality of programmes offered at STC.

STC strictly complies with all the quality policies put forward by the awarding bodies.

2.1.1   Annual monitoring

The formal procedures for the annual monitoring of courses are set out in the quality assurance documents of our awarding institution. STC is monitored on an annual basis by both NCC and UoW.

For NCC courses this is done in the following stages:

1. The Academic Development Manager (at NCC Education) carries out an annual audit visit to monitor the quality of teaching and processes at STC, keeping in mind all interactions from the previous 12 months.
2. During the annual audit, the Academic Development Manager shares and discusses a statistical report based on the performance of STC candidates during the previous year.
3. STC is required to return a short-evaluation statement.
4. Following the outcome of stages 1 to 3, the Academic Development Manager fills in the audit form together with the evaluation.

For UoW courses the following processes are adopted:

1. Course committee meetings involving STC Administration, Academic Leaders, Lecturers and Student Representatives for all courses are held once a semester. A report is compiled and sent to the Link Tutors at UoW in the UK. This includes student feedback obtained for each module.
2. A Continuous Monitoring and Improvement Processes (CMI) report is compiled and sent to the Link Tutors in the UK as part of the QA process.
3. At the end of the academic year, another CMI report is finalised and sent to the Link Tutors in the UK, including teacher observations carried out during the Academic Year.

2.1.2   Study Board Meetings

Study board meetings are held twice a year and are reserved for students studying academic modules at level 5 or higher. These meetings are normally held in the first semester (typically during last week of November) and then in the second semester (typically during the last week of February).

The objective of the study board meetings is to serve as a forum for staff as well as the student representatives to review and in a collaborative manner discuss issues pertinent with academia. The aim is to further improve the student experience by ensuring that the student representatives obtain feedback from their respective cohort and discuss this with both academic and administrative members of staff.

2.2 Changes to Academic Programmes

Information from teaching staff as well as students, through the administration of surveys, annual feedback, student council meetings and study board meetings are used to provide information to the academic partners.

2.2.1   Major Changes

When major changes to the programme are proposed by the awarding body, STC engages in communication with the awarding body to understand the nature of the changes and to ensure that all the provisions required locally are put in place. This might include provision of training to ensure that all lecturing staff is appropriately prepared for the changes, as well as a resource study to ensure that all the required equipment is available before the commencement of the new modules.

Any changes to the mode of delivery and to programme learning outcomes are considered as major changes.

2.2.2   Minor changes

Minor changes are communicated to the academic leaders, either through direct communication with the awarding body or through the senior management. These changes are then channelled to the relevant lecturers.

2.3 New Programmes or Modules

2.3.1   Roles and Responsibilities

Senior management (as a business development function), in conjunction with academic leaders, are tasked with initiating the process for the approval of new courses to be delivered at STC Malta.

2.3.2   Validation

All programmes that are delivered at STC are approved by the MFHEA. Any required documentation and timelines as put forward by MFHEA are adhered to in order to ensure the appropriate certification of the courses.

2.4 Removal of Programme or Module

Any programmes or modules that are no longer serving an academic need or are no longer deemed suitable need to go through a process for their market withdrawal. All students will be advised about the teach out and will be allowed to retake assessments (if applicable) within a reasonable timeframe as indicated by the partner, even in the cases where the programme or module is not running anymore.

3. ENGAGEMENT WITH PROFESSIONAL, STATUTORY AND OR REGULATORY BODIES

STC's roots are planted into the industry. As such our relationship with industry has always been particularly strong. Employers show a favourable disposition to offer jobs and internships opportunities to students who study at STC. STC has always been particularly diligent when it comes to ensuring that collaboration with key partners is kept to high esteem.

3.1 The MFHEA

The Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA), previously the NCFHE, was officially launched in 2021 and is legislated by the revised Education Act which came into force on the 1st January 2021. The MFHEA's mission statement is "*to foster the development and achievement of excellence in further and higher education in Malta through research, effective licensing, accreditation, quality assurance, and recognition of qualifications established under the Malta Qualifications Framework*".

MFHEA provides accreditation to further and higher educational institutions and is an entity that can accredit programmes, or courses of studies, at higher education level to be delivered in Malta. This includes both national and international qualifications. It monitors quality assurance of both educational institutions and programmes or courses, validates informal and non-formal learning and actively researches and provides policy recommendation on issues related to further and higher education.

As part of its remit, the Authority also exercises extensive compliance monitoring activities to ensure that all institutions are adhering to all licensing requirements. This includes media checks of all institutions' published information, both digitally and physically, to confirm that adverts and information about the institution and the educational programmes which it offers are clear and accurate.

3.1.1   Licensing

As part of the Quality Assurance Lifecycle, the license renewal process implies the re-submission and review of different documentation that assure educational quality and a safe and secure environment, such as:

- Quality Assurance policy and Audits, both internal and external
- Declaration by a warranted Health and Safety Officer that the venue is free from hazards
- Declaration by a warranted architect that the teaching venue is structurally stable, safe and sound

The license renewal is subject to MFHEA and all details can be consulted on their official website, https://mfhea.mt/

3.2 External Quality Audits

MFHEA is an affiliate member of ENQA, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. The Qualifications Recognition Information Centre (QRIC) within MFHEA also forms part of the European Network of Information Centres in the European Region (ENIC) and the National Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (NARIC). The Commission also acts as the National Contact Point for the European Qualifications Framework.

The MFHEA has strengthened quality assurance in Malta through the establishment of the National Quality Assurance Framework for Further and Higher Education, in 2015. Through this framework, MFHEA has established the parameters for national external quality audits (EQA) system that complements the internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms of individual further and higher education entities. MFHEA carried the first external quality audit to STC in October 2017. The results are available online.

Each external quality assurance audit report is followed by an internal review at STC where the senior management team and academic leaders review the outcomes and develop a plan to tackle the shortcomings.

4. ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

STC always ensures that enrolled students present a true copy of the original certificates. The identity of all students is also verified before their enrolment. A copy of a valid ID card or passport is kept in the student's file after verifying that it is a true copy of the original document, always in respect of GDPR and other applicable data privacy laws. Entry requirements for each course, at different levels, is established by NCC Education and the University of Wolverhampton.

5. ASSESSMENT

5.1 Institute Regulations

STC takes all examinations and assessments extremely seriously and ensures that our guidelines are closely observed so that the entire process is secure and efficiently administered. STC endeavours to keep the same assessment (both assignments and examinations) in terms of mode, deadlines and delivery faithful to those of the original partners. This ensures that quality remains high and the student is achieving a diploma, degree, or any other award that is consistent with what is expected from students studying from that university or centre.

5.2 Academic Integrity

Ensuring that students follow academic rules when it comes to all forms of assessment is essential in providing quality education as well as to preserve the reputation that STC holds. As such STC employs a number of different mechanisms in ensuring adherence with assessment rules.

5.2.1 Assignments

Seminars designed to train lecturers in identifying different types of academic malpractice, such as colluding and plagiarism, are held. All assignments are scanned for plagiarism through online software such as Turn-it-in. The academic partner provides access to such systems. STC's lecturing and administrative staff ensure that the process is adhered to.

Students are informed how the software works during the induction seminar. Adequate training is then provided throughout the academic year as necessary, thus ensuring that, irrespective of the students' academic background, all students become familiar with using such software.

More information can be found in the policy document - *Assessment Instructions Policy.*

5.2.2   Examinations

STC employs a number of practices to ensure that the examination process is not hindered by any academic malpractice attempt. Members of the administration team and invigilators are trained in order to provide students with clear instructions on the expected behaviour during examinations.

5.3 Moderation

Quality management is essential within assessment. Academic leaders provide initial support with regards to marking based on best practices and recommendations obtained from the academic partner.

External moderation at NCC is also held with a sample of the papers being sent to the academic partner to provide an indication of the marking performed as well as potentially adjust any marks to fit standard. The choice of the papers sent for moderation include borderline marks as well as papers within the different marking categories.

At UoW, assessments are moderated by the Module Leader in the UK, who then confirms provisional marks issued by STC lecturers or puts forward any amendments. Each module is then made accessible to an External Examiner during the Moderation Boards at University, which are held every semester, after which marks are finalised and issued on students' records.

5.4 Disability

STC believes in being able to provide quality education for all. Inclusion is at the heart of the institution. Students who provide information to the centre about any disability that might hinder their learning are allowed, once proven by the relevant documentation, to obtain any support that is recommended by the professionals.

6.   STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

All programmes at STC are delivered in a way that aims to encourage students to take an active role in the learning process. Each module completion requires an 80% attendance record.

The way we deliver our programmes aims to promote:

- Respect for diversity and specific needs (more information available on *Welfare Policy* and on *Special Considerations Policy*). Lecturers are also encouraged to be culturally responsive and to provide students with any extra support especially when there are gaps in students' knowledge or skills because of discrepancies in their previous learning experiences. It is the academic leaders' role to support lecturers in this respect.

- Learner-teacher, learner-learner mutual respect relationships (more info available on *Staff code of conduct* and *Students code of conduct*).

- All lectures are delivered face-to-face on campus, and a variety of pedagogical methods to enhance students' learning experience are adopted. Constructing knowledge through questioning and

engaging students through class discussions are considered to be crucial, and the lecturer's role is essential as a facilitator, guide and assessor of the learning that is taking place. Lecturers are also encouraged to open up the courses to external expertise in the respective field. As much as the pedagogical methods used depend on the nature of the module, the following are some of the most commonly used methods: lecturing/direct instruction, cooperative learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning and student-led learning. Developing and supporting student autonomy is of utmost importance. Students are constantly encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning through private study which includes self-reflection exercises.

- A progressive sense of autonomy, while offering guidance and support. This is especially important in the first year, as an entry point, since students often come from student experiences more based on memorisation of content. STC aims to encourage students to continuously broaden their knowledge and enlarge their vision of the subjects, areas of study and professional applicability.

- Continuous feedback to our students on their performance, often in an informal way during the lectures. When needed, one-to-one appointments are set at the administration department or with the respective course leader, in order to discuss with the student any shortcomings or challenges.

- An open dialogue between the academic and administration team, to deal with any issues as from the very start at STC (registration and induction). This open dialogue, together with the student satisfaction forms submitted for each module, are the main channels through which STC evaluates and adjusts the modes of delivery and pedagogical methods on a day-to-day basis. All other forms of feedback, as mentioned earlier, are also given importance. Students are also given the possibility to forward a complaint (in accordance with the *Complaints Policy*).

- Study skills support. We aim to empower our students with better study skills, through a session during induction day, and through one-to-one meetings with the academic leaders as required. Moreover, lecturers are encouraged to support students on a daily basis in class.

- Support that is not academic in nature. STC understands that academic support alone is not enough and that students face various issues during their student life and at times go through very difficult phases that can hinder them from reaching their potential. Lecturers are encouraged to be particularly vigilant and understanding and to try and give students as much support as possible. Lecturers are encouraged to inform the academic leaders whenever they feel that a student might need further support. Whenever necessary, students are offered the possibility to have one-to-one sessions with the Welfare Officer. Caregivers are also given the opportunity to discuss any issues with administration and/or academic leaders.

With regards to the assessment processes:

- Each student is made aware of the methods of assessment and criteria while registering at STC and reminded at the beginning of each module. Such information is also available online.

- Although the final grade is only based on the assignment submission/examination work, we encourage our students to commit to regular private study and assigned coursework. This is mandatory in order to be eligible for the main submission.

- For speaking examinations and presentations, assessment is carried out by more than one examiner at STC and then double marked at the partner institution.

- A policy of pre and post assessment special considerations is available (*Special Considerations Policy*) aiming to take into account possible mitigating circumstances.

- Detailed marking schemes released by partner institutions and moderation procedures (as per section 5.3 above) are meant to ensure consistency when it comes to marking assignments. In the case of NCC programmes, all examinations are marked directly by NCC.

- A formal procedure for appeals is in place for both NCC and WLV programmes. For NCC, please refer to Post-results Policy.

- For UoW programmes, the University specifies that appeals should be lodged in cases where:

  o Grades on E-vision have been published incorrectly.
  o There has been a material irregularity in the assessment process which casts reasonable doubt on the validity of the results
  o Student performance was affected by exceptional factors which could not (for valid reasons) be notified to the Assessment Board prior to its meetings
  o The Institutions has not followed its procedures correctly
  o The degree classification has been calculated incorrectly.

  Appeals may not be made against the academic judgement of the University, meaning that students cannot question grades or other University decisions simply because of disappointment in the results. Academic staff are considered to be the experts, and UoW employs both internal and external procedures to ensure assessments are marked fairly. Students wishing to lodge an appeal are required to do so within 20 days of their marks being published on E-vision. Forms may be downloaded from the following link: https://www.wlv.ac.uk/current-students/conduct-and-appeals/academic-appeals/

7. EXTERNAL AUDITS

7.1 Terms of Ownership

STC complies with the MFHEA requirements with regards to External Quality Audits (EQAs) that are carried out under the responsibility of the MFHEA. In making arrangements for EQAs, the MFHEA adheres to the following standards:

- *it examines the fitness for purpose and effectiveness of the IQA processes used by the entity, including an examination of the system's structure, the documentation it produces and the evaluations of quality conducted by the entity;*

- *it examines the compliance of educational institutions with obligations of licence holders under these regulations, where applicable; as well as any conditions or restrictions imposed by the MFHEA on the licensee under these regulations;*

- *it includes appropriate investigatory mechanisms to ensure financial probity, and where the provider is a body corporate, to ensure that the members of the body corporate, the legal representative and the persons occupying a headship position are fit and proper persons to deliver further or higher education programmes[1].*

MFHEA external quality audit analysis the educational institutions on 11 standards: policy for quality assurance; institutional probity; design and approval of programmes; student-centred learning, teaching and assessment; student admission, progression, recognition and certification; teaching staff; learning resources and student support; information management; public information and on-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes; cyclical external quality assurance.

STC further complies with NCC Education regulatory compliance framework, which is in accordance with Ofqual's General Conditions of Recognition, Section C. Compliance is monitored by the means of an annual monitoring report.

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[1] Internal and External Quality Assurance in Further and Higher Education (NCFHE, nd)

NCC Annual Monitoring Report consists of five sections[2].

- Parts A & B contain the information held in our systems about STC and candidate performance, alongside global performance statistics.

- Part C is completed by NCC Academic Development Manager to give feedback on academic performance at the Centre and raise any concerns. A risk rating is given for a number of areas by the ADM at the end of this section.

- Part D is completed by Centre to confirm ongoing compliance with NCC Education's Centre Regulations and provide any feedback on our products and services.

- Part E contains action plans for both the Centre and NCC Education, to be agreed upon by the Academic Development Manager and STC.

In order to assure institutional probity, STC accounts are also audited yearly by an external accounting auditor. Yearly financial statements and regular budget plans are regularly issued and discussed at Board level.

7.2 Timeline

The timeline is proposed by the MFHEA and STC seeks to adhere to the proposals put forward. Generally, the MFHEA provides the dates of the audit around 30 weeks before the event. A series of activities, such as questionnaires and reports are carried out during the weeks preceding the meetings and peer review panel. NCC and UoW advises STC on the date of the annual monitoring report and visit (when applicable) a few weeks before it takes place.

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[2] Centre Monitoring Policy (NCC, 2019)