

A LearnFrame Decision Guide

The Programme Design Decision Guide

A framework for organisations evaluating a custom eLearning development engagement.

FOR THE ATTENTION OF

Heads of Learning, Programme Managers, L&D Directors, and senior executives at professional certification bodies, regulated training providers, corporate academies, and other content-rich organisations commissioning a digital learning programme.

READING TIME

Approximately 35 minutes.

WHAT THIS DOCUMENT IS

A working framework for the executive conversation. Not a sales document. Useful before commissioning a custom eLearning engagement with any supplier.

How to use this guide

This document has two audiences. The first is the team inside the institute or organisation that will be commissioning the work — the Head of Learning, the Programme Manager, or the L&D Director who will be responsible for the engagement. The second is the executive team or board who will be approving the budget. Both audiences need a shared language before the conversation begins.

The guide is structured in five parts, each readable on its own:

PART ONE

The design discipline gap — what separates programmes that land from programmes that don't.

PART TWO

The six dimensions of programme design — the framework, applied at the programme level.

PART THREE

The five module decisions — how the framework applies to each module that gets built.

PART FOUR

The five questions the executive team should ask before approving any custom eLearning investment.

PART FIVE

The honest column — where money is well spent in custom eLearning, and where it is typically wasted. Plus the shape of a properly structured engagement, and a scoping worksheet your team can take to its internal conversation.

The framework is supplier-agnostic by design. It works whether you intend to commission LearnFrame, a different supplier, or to build the programme in-house. The point is a decision the executive team can defend, against any option on the table.

PART ONE

The design discipline gap

Why most custom eLearning programmes underperform, and what separates the ones that don't.

Most professional certification bodies, regulated training providers, and corporate academies will, at some point in the next three years, commission a custom eLearning programme. The pressures driving the decision are well-understood — member geography, scheduling friction, regulator expectations, the demand of a generation of professionals who learn online by default.

What is less well-understood at the level the executive team sees is the difference between a programme that has been *digitised* and one that has been *designed for digital*. The former is a classroom programme delivered through a screen, or an existing programme ported to a new authoring environment. The latter is a programme that uses the medium properly — and produces a learner experience that holds its own against the classroom version, often surpassing it.

The gap between the two is rarely a budget gap. Both efforts cost roughly the same. The gap is a **design discipline gap** — whether the team building the programme has a shared, deliberate definition of what good looks like in the digital medium.

“The difference between the institutes whose members value the digital version, and the institutes whose members keep asking when the classroom version is coming back, is not effort or budget. It is whether the team has a definition of *properly* that is fit for the medium.”

This guide sets out the framework that, in our experience working with content-rich institutions across three decades, defines that discipline. It is written for the team that will commission the work and for the executive team that will approve it. Used together, the two parts of the institution end up with a shared language for the decision.

PART ONE

Three patterns that produce underperformance

Three failure modes show up in the majority of custom eLearning programmes that underperform. They are not the only failures, but they are the ones we encounter most often. Each is recognisable in advance — which means each is preventable, provided the team commissioning the work is alert to the pattern.

PATTERN ONE — Conversion without redesign

The institute decides to move a classroom programme into digital delivery. Existing materials are converted, more or less faithfully, into a digital authoring tool. The structure remains the same. The sequence remains the same. The pace and rhythm remain the same as the classroom — two-day intensive blocks, half-day units, long-form assessment. Members log in, encounter the classroom in a different medium, and find it harder to engage with than the original. Completion rates fall. The institute concludes that digital doesn't work for this audience.

The actual diagnosis is that the programme was digitised but not designed for digital. The medium expects different things from learners than the classroom does, and the design did not make the shift.

PATTERN TWO — Content-first, architecture-second

The institute commissions a custom eLearning supplier to build a programme. The conversation is dominated by content — what topics to cover, in what depth, with what subject-matter experts. The architecture of the programme — how modules sequence, how assessment works, how cohorts move, how faculty appears, how the learner journey is supported end-to-end — is treated as a downstream operational matter. The result is a body of competent content sitting in an incoherent learner experience.

The pattern is recognisable because the team can describe what topics are covered but cannot describe what the learner journey actually looks like, end to end.

PATTERN THREE — Assessment as last decision

The content gets designed. The platform gets selected. The production gets scoped. The assessment — the thing the credential ultimately rests on — gets designed last, in the final sprint before launch, against content that was built without it in mind. The questions don't quite cover what was taught. The scenarios don't quite map to what members do at work. The credential drifts from the curriculum that produced it. Members notice within the first cohort.

For a certification body — where the credential is the product — that drift compounds faster than anywhere else, and is harder to undo.

PART TWO

The six dimensions of programme design

Each of the six dimensions below is a place where the classroom default does not translate to digital. The absence of a deliberate digital design choice on any one of them quietly degrades the programme. The presence of all six — designed in concert — is what produces a digital programme members value at least as much as the classroom equivalent.

These six dimensions sit at the programme level. They describe the architecture inside which individual modules are built. The module-level decisions — outcome, interactivity, media richness, accessibility, and ownership — are addressed separately in Part Three of this guide.

Each dimension is presented on its own page, with three components: the design question the team should be asking, the failure mode that follows from getting it wrong, and a brief diagnostic test the team can apply to a programme already in flight.

THE SIX DIMENSIONS

1. Pacing & Structure — how the programme respects the working week
2. Cohort & Community — the social learning experience, deliberately engineered
3. Faculty Presence — subject matter expertise as engagement, not as recorded performance
4. Assessment Design — credential rigour built for digital from the ground up
5. Member Experience — the journey from enrolment to completion, treated as a designed arc
6. Production Craft — quality that matches the institute's brand standards

DIMENSION 1

Pacing & Structure

The design question

How is the programme designed around the way working professionals actually consume learning — in the gaps in their week rather than in two-day intensive blocks? Are units sized for a single sitting? Are stopping and resuming points obvious? Does the rhythm respect the working week, or compete with it?

The failure mode

When pacing has not been designed deliberately, learners start the programme strong and disengage around weeks four to six. Completion rates fall off a cliff. The institute attributes the failure to learner motivation. The actual cause is that the programme was structured for classroom consumption and is being asked to compete with the rest of the working week, on the learner's own time. It loses that competition every week.

Diagnostic test

- Can the team specify, in writing, the average time a member is expected to spend per week on this programme — and is that figure realistic for the audience?
- Are individual modules consumable in a single sitting (15–25 minutes), or do they require continuous attention longer than the working day allows?
- Has the team designed for re-entry — can a member resume mid-module without losing their place or having to restart?
- Has the calendar of the programme been mapped against the realistic calendar of the working professional, including the weeks when the audience will be busiest?

DIMENSION 2

Cohort & Community

The design question

Is the social dimension of learning deliberately engineered into the programme, or treated as an optional add-on? Are members visible to each other? Is conversation structured rather than hoped for? Are recognition moments designed in?

The failure mode

When cohort and community are not designed, members complete the programme as isolated individuals. They emerge with a certificate and no relationships. The institute's differentiating asset — its professional community — gets none of the benefit the programme could have generated. Members complete, log out, and never return. The cohort experience that a flagship classroom programme automatically produced is absent from its digital successor.

Diagnostic test

- Has the cohort experience been designed — or is it assumed to emerge organically from a shared discussion forum?
- Are there structured moments where members are required to engage with each other, not just with content?
- Are members visible to one another in some meaningful way — by name, by role, by their work?
- Is there a recognition moment at the end of the programme that the cohort experiences together, or does completion happen alone in front of a screen?
- Does the institute's wider community — alumni, faculty, examining committee — appear anywhere in the programme experience?

DIMENSION 3

Faculty Presence

The design question

How does subject-matter expertise appear in the programme experience? As live engagement — masterclasses, Q&A sessions, office hours, faculty commentary on member work — or as recorded video that was shot once and replayed? Can a member, at the moment they have a question, find a path to an expert response?

The failure mode

When faculty appears only as recorded video, the programme reads to members as a publication rather than a learning experience. Faculty becomes a one-way broadcast. Members watch and move on — and lose the experience of being taught by someone they recognise as an authority. The institute's most valuable asset for differentiation — the credibility of its faculty — gets compressed into video clips that learners forget within weeks.

Diagnostic test

- Does the programme include any live or near-live faculty touchpoints — masterclasses, scheduled Q&A, office hours?
- Is there a clearly visible path for a member who has a question to receive an expert response within a defined timeframe?
- Do recorded faculty appearances include moments where the faculty member directly addresses the learner, or are they pure exposition?
- Is faculty work assessed and credited — or are faculty members treated as production assets to be filmed?

DIMENSION 4

Assessment Design

The design question

Is assessment designed alongside the content, against the same learning outcomes — or is it scoped at the end of the build, against content that was created without it in mind? Is the assessment defensible enough to carry the same credential weight as the classroom version it replaces?

The failure mode

When assessment is scoped last, the credential drifts from the curriculum that produced it. The questions cover topics the learner encountered, but they do not measure the capability the programme was built to develop. The credential becomes less credible than the classroom version it replaced. For certification bodies, where the credential is the product, the consequence compounds — alumni word-of-mouth turns against the digital version, members prefer the classroom track, and the institute is asked within two years to redesign again. Assessment-bolted-on is the failure mode that produces the most expensive recovery work.

Diagnostic test

- Was the assessment criteria designed before, alongside, or after the content?
- Can the team trace each assessment item back to a specific learning outcome the programme is built around?
- If a regulator or examining body challenged the rigour of the digital credential, what evidence would the institute put on the table?
- Are the scenarios and applied tasks in the assessment drawn from the actual professional context of the learner — or are they generic?
- Has the assessment been validated by people other than those who wrote it, and against an external benchmark?

DIMENSION 5

Member Experience

The design question

Has the journey from enrolment to completion been treated as a designed arc, or as a series of operational handoffs? Is there real onboarding, clear visibility of what is coming next, proactive support, and a completion moment that is genuinely recognised — not a downloaded PDF certificate?

The failure mode

When member experience is treated as operational, the programme feels to learners like a fragmented sequence of administrative emails, content drops, and access notifications. There is no sense of being on a journey. Members lose confidence in the institute's competence and start to question whether they should have enrolled. The drop-off is highest in the first three weeks, before learners have built any relationship with the programme — a window the institute could have used to anchor commitment.

Diagnostic test

- Is the first week of the programme designed with onboarding-specific care — orientation, expectations, anchoring the commitment?
- Does the member always know what is coming next, and approximately when?
- Is there a defined route for the member to escalate a question or a problem to a real person, with a stated response time?
- Is completion treated as a moment worth marking — a ceremony, a credential issued with weight, a community moment — or is it the silent appearance of a PDF in an inbox?
- Are members invited into the institute's wider community at completion, or do they leave the programme into nothing?

DIMENSION 6

Production Craft

The design question

Does the production quality of the programme match the institute's brand standards — and the consumer products its members use every day? Visual design, audio, video, written materials, platform experience: do they feel current, or do they signal that the institute has not invested seriously in the digital channel?

The failure mode

When production craft falls below the standard of what members encounter elsewhere in their digital lives, the programme reads as second-tier — regardless of how good the content underneath is. Members make judgements about institutional seriousness from production quality in the first minute of contact. A flagship classroom programme converted to digital with cheap production signals to members that the digital track is the lesser track, and reinforces a preference for the classroom version that the institute was trying to migrate them away from.

Diagnostic test

- Are the design and production standards being held against the institute's brand guidelines — and against current consumer expectations, not against last decade's eLearning conventions?
- Is there a clear standard for visual treatment, audio quality, video production, and platform user experience — written down, shared, and enforced?
- Is the institute's authoring environment (Articulate Rise, Storyline, or equivalent) themed properly to the institute's brand, or does it use the default vendor styling?
- Has the team budgeted time and money for production quality, or has it been treated as a residual?

PART THREE

The five module decisions

If the six programme dimensions describe the architecture, the five module decisions describe the unit-level choices that get made inside that architecture. Each module that gets built passes through these five decisions, in this sequence.

Getting them in the right sequence matters more than people anticipate. The institute that makes the media-richness decision before the outcome decision ends up with rich production that doesn't serve a clear outcome. The institute that makes the platform decision before the interactivity decision ends up with the platform's preferences driving the design rather than the learning need.

The five decisions, in sequence

DECISION ONE — Outcome

What should a learner be able to do, demonstrate, or decide after completing this module? A capability outcome, not a knowledge outcome. The outcome anchors every subsequent decision. If the team cannot answer this in one specific sentence per module, the rest of the design will drift.

DECISION TWO — Interactivity Level

How much active learner participation does the outcome require? Level 1 (read and acknowledge) through Level 4 (applied scenario with consequences). The level chosen should follow from the outcome — not from the production budget. Higher interactivity costs more to build and is warranted only when the outcome requires it.

DECISION THREE — Media Richness

Which production elements earn their cost for this module? Voiceover, custom illustration, talking-head video, AI-presenter video, animation, branching scenarios. Each adds initial cost and — critically — adds lifecycle cost when the content changes. For regulated content that updates frequently, lower-richness production is often the right answer, not the lazy one.

DECISION FOUR — Accessibility & Compliance

Which accessibility standard applies (WCAG 2.1 AA is the default for regulated and public-facing audiences) and which regulator-specific requirements are in scope? Built in from the start, accessibility costs a fraction of what it costs to retrofit later.

DECISION FIVE — Ownership & Lifecycle

Who owns the source files at the end of the engagement? When does this content age? Who maintains it? If the institute does not have editable source files in its possession, every future change becomes a supplier dependency. Ownership is a strategic decision, not a procurement detail.

PART FOUR

Five questions the executive team should ask

If a custom eLearning programme proposal is on the executive agenda, these are the questions that surface whether the work has been thought about as a design discipline or as a procurement exercise. None of them require the executive team to be expert in learning design. They require honest answers from the team that will own the programme.

Each question is paired with the answer to watch for, and the answer that should trigger further conversation.

QUESTION ONE

Who, by name, owns the design discipline across all six dimensions?

Not the project. Not the procurement. The discipline — the quality of the design decisions across pacing, cohort, faculty, assessment, member experience, and production. The answer should be a named individual with the seniority to push back when the work falls short.

Listen for: “The project team collectively will own it” — or “The supplier will handle it.” Both answers indicate that no single person has authority to defend quality when budget and timeline pressure arrive. They will arrive.

QUESTION TWO

What does the completed programme look like to a learner, end-to-end?

Can the team walk the executive through the member journey from enrolment to completion in concrete, specific terms — what happens in week one, what happens at the midpoint, what happens at completion?

Listen for: Feature lists rather than journeys. “There will be modules, assessments, discussion forums, a final exam, and a certificate” is a feature list. The journey is what the learner experiences across those features, in what sequence, with what supports. If the answer is a feature list, the member experience has not been designed yet.

PART FOUR

Five questions, continued

QUESTION THREE

How will the digital credential be defended on rigour?

If a regulator, an employer, or an examining body challenged the rigour of the digital version compared to the classroom version, what evidence would the institute put on the table?

Listen for: Vague gestures at assessment without specific defensibility. The institute's credential is its most valuable asset; the digital version must be at least as defensible as the classroom version it replaces. If the executive team cannot articulate how the digital credential is defended, the credential is at risk regardless of what the marketing says.

QUESTION FOUR

What are we doing differently from a recorded version of the classroom?

Three concrete examples. Not three general principles — three specific design choices that would not appear in a programme that was simply filming the classroom and putting it online.

Listen for: Inability to name three. If the team cannot name three concrete design choices that distinguish the digital version, the programme is being digitised rather than designed for digital. The work that would justify the digital investment has not yet been done.

QUESTION FIVE

When and how will we know whether it has worked?

What member outcomes will the institute measure? When? At what threshold does the programme count as successful, and at what threshold does it count as having underperformed?

Listen for: Completion rates as the only metric. Completion is the easiest thing to measure and the least useful proxy for whether a programme has worked. Member capability, member retention with the institute, alumni word-of-mouth, regulator perception, and member willingness to recommend the programme are all better signals. A programme without defined success measures cannot be improved or defended when its first year produces uneven results.

PART FIVE

The honest column

Suppliers tend not to volunteer the list below — it is the wrong conversation to have when winning the work depends on the size of the build. The list is what experience teaches when the buyer's interests are the only ones in the room.

Where money is typically well spent

Storyboard sign-off before development begins

The single highest-leverage step in any custom eLearning engagement. A signed storyboard prevents the most expensive class of rework — discovering a misunderstanding two weeks into a Rise build. The cost of revising a storyboard is hours; the cost of revising a developed module is weeks. Insist on storyboards, and insist on time to review them properly.

Knowledge checks at the right cadence

Roughly every five to seven minutes of content. This single design choice drives retention more than any other interactive element. Inexpensive to design well. Very expensive to design badly (or to omit).

Real scenarios drawn from the learner's own world

A worked example using a situation the learner recognises from their professional life lands far harder than a generic case. The build cost is the same; the outcome is different. Cheap to do, easy to skip.

WCAG 2.1 AA accessibility, built in from the start

Three to four times cheaper than retrofitting. Non-negotiable for regulated and public-facing audiences. If accessibility is not in the original brief, the brief is incomplete.

Source files retained by the institute

Always retain the editable source files, the brand assets, and any custom illustration. This protects the institute from supplier lock-in and allows the in-house team to make small updates without raising a change request. The institute should own its content; the supplier should provide capacity, not permanent dependency.

A reusable theme for the programme

If the institute is building module one of many, a one-time investment in a reusable theme makes every subsequent module faster and cheaper. Worth paying for even if it adds 10–15% to module one's cost — it amortises across the full build.

PART FIVE

Where money is typically wasted

Each of these is suggested by suppliers more often than it is justified by the learner's actual need. Each is plausible-sounding, visually impressive in a demo, and rarely produces measurable improvement in what the learner can do after the module.

Cinematic introduction and conclusion animations

Visually polished. Costly to produce. Skipped by every learner after the first viewing. A clean, well-typeset welcome screen serves the same orientation purpose at a fraction of the cost.

Custom characters and illustrations when stock would do

Custom illustration is expensive and is rarely justified for technical professional learning. A small, consistently used library of stock illustration looks at least as professional as bespoke work and costs a fraction. Reserve custom illustration for the moments where it earns its cost.

Voiceover narration on text the learner could read

For reference content, narration is often slower than reading and harder to scan. Voiceover earns its cost when it adds something the reader cannot get from the page — pace, walkthrough of a calculation, tone, demonstration. Default voiceover is friction, not value.

Branching scenarios where no branch has real consequence

Branching is only valuable if the wrong choice leads somewhere meaningfully different from the right choice. “Branch and converge” — where all paths lead back to the same outcome — is engagement theatre. If the branches matter, build them. If they don't, save the budget for something that does.

Gamification that isn't tied to genuine motivation

Badges and points only shift behaviour when learners care about the badge. In professional development they almost always don't. The institute's credential carries the motivation; piling badges on top of a credential dilutes it.

Building one showcase module before the system is designed

If the institute has many modules to build, the right investment is in the system — the theme, the templates, the knowledge-check patterns, the accessibility checklist — not in making the first module a showcase. Module one should be the start of a repeatable pipeline. The bespoke module that doesn't fit the pipeline produces a beautiful asset and a stalled programme.

PART FIVE

The shape of a proper engagement

Open-ended retainers and ambiguous deliverables are the failure mode that the engagement structure below is designed to prevent. Each phase has a defined scope, a defined deliverable, and a natural decision point at its conclusion. Either party can decide whether the next phase begins; the work to that point stands on its own.

Phase one — Discovery and scoping

Four to six weeks. A paid phase to understand the institution, audit existing learning assets, diagnose the design discipline gap as it applies to this specific programme, and define the scope of the work that follows. Concludes with a written diagnosis and a fixed-scope quote for phase two. Either side can decide whether to proceed. The diagnosis and the framework stand on their own as the institute's asset, regardless of who builds the programme.

Phase two — Design and build

Variable length, scoped at the end of phase one. Programme architecture, instructional design, content development, multimedia production, accessibility QA, and platform packaging proceed against the scoped brief. Cadence and milestones agreed at the outset; storyboards signed off before development begins; production proceeds against signed-off design.

Phase three — Embed and transfer

Four to eight weeks. Knowledge, processes, and capability transfer to the institute's in-house team. Source files handed over. Documentation completed. The engagement winds down with the institute owning the outcome and the maintenance — not dependent on continued supplier involvement.

“A scoping engagement that only works if the institute commissions the next phase is not a scoping engagement. It is a sales process with a written cover.”

The discovery-first model is what separates a working partnership from a procurement exercise. The institute that commissions a discovery phase receives the diagnostic — and the diagnostic is the engagement's first deliverable, not a precursor to the real work. Everything that follows is a separate decision, made with the diagnostic in hand.

PART FIVE

Scoping worksheet for your team

A page to take to the team. Filled in honestly, these prompts produce a brief that any custom eLearning supplier can quote against accurately. “We don’t know yet” is an acceptable answer — the point of the worksheet is to identify what the team has decided and what it has not.

1. PROGRAMME OUTCOME

In one sentence: what should a learner be able to do or demonstrate after completing this programme that they could not do or demonstrate before?

2. AUDIENCE

Who, precisely, is the learner? Role, level, sector, geography, current relationship with the institute. If the audience is broader than one type, name them in order of priority.

3. SCALE

Approximate number of modules in the programme. Approximate annual learner count. Whether this is a single build or a recurring annual programme.

4. OUTPUT PLATFORM

Where will the programme be hosted? SCORM 1.2, SCORM 2004, xAPI, native platform integration?
Authoring environment selected (Articulate Rise, Storyline, other)?

PART FIVE

Scoping worksheet, continued

5. ACCESSIBILITY STANDARD

Required standard (WCAG 2.1 AA is the default). Languages required. Mobile-first or desktop-first. Any regulator-specific obligations.

6. ASSESSMENT MODEL

How is the credential awarded? What evidence does the learner produce? What is being measured, and against what standard? Designed alongside content, or after?

7. INTERNAL CAPABILITY

What does the institute's in-house team own today? Subject matter expertise, instructional design, production, project management? Where is the team strong, and where will it depend on the supplier?

8. OWNERSHIP AND LIFECYCLE

When will the institute take ownership of the source files? Who will maintain the content after delivery? Expected update cadence over the next three years.

9. TIMELINE

Hard launch date or guideline? Constraints driving the date (regulator deadline, member intake, organisational milestone)? Realistic discovery and build windows?

10. SUCCESS DEFINITION

How will the institute know whether the programme has worked? What member outcomes are being measured, on what timeline? What is the threshold for success?

CLOSING

From framework to conversation

The framework in this guide is the lens we use across every engagement at LearnFrame. It is also the framework the institute can use to evaluate any supplier — including LearnFrame.

If the team commissioning the work has filled in the scoping worksheet honestly, has named the individual who will own the design discipline, can answer the executive's five questions, and knows where money is well spent and where it is wasted — the institute is in a position to commission seriously, and to receive seriously.

If, on the other hand, the worksheet has more blanks than the team is comfortable with, the next step is not to commission. It is to close the gaps the worksheet has exposed.

Either route leads to a better engagement than the alternative — which is to commission a programme into ambiguity, and to find out twelve months later that the gap was wider than anyone admitted at the outset.

ABOUT LEARNFRAME

What we do, in one paragraph

LearnFrame designs and builds digital learning programmes for professional certification bodies, regulated training providers, corporate academies, and other content-rich organisations. Strategic and creative direction from Dublin, with production capacity through an established team in Cape Town. Every engagement begins with a paid discovery and scoping phase — the diagnostic is the engagement's first deliverable, not a precursor to the real work.

If your institute would value a conversation about a programme you are scoping — or about whether a programme should be scoped at all — we would welcome it.

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Custom eLearning development: www.learnframe.com/custom-elearning-development