



## **ADDITIONAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT STANDARDS FOR PROGRAMS DELIVERED IN BLENDED, DISTRIBUTED OR DISTANCE MODES**

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With revisions to April 2011*

The Campus Alberta Quality Council, in its review of degree programs, is guided by the principle that while instructional methods may differ, expectations of high quality remain the same. The key considerations in assuring the quality of any program are that they are learning-driven and that they are informed by excellent research and scholarship not only in the discipline or disciplines addressed in the program but also in teaching, learning and assessment.

Degree programs delivered in whole or in part in blended, distributed or distance modes, like degree programs offered exclusively in face-to-face mode, are required to meet Council's existing quality assessment standards for undergraduate and graduate programs. In addition, these programs will be assessed using the following standards for blended, distributed or distance learning.

### **STANDARDS**

Although some of the standards listed below may be applicable only to degrees using particular pedagogies or technologies, all degree programs will be consistent with leading practices in teaching and learning. Council has developed these additional standards with reference to national and international norms and benchmarks for blended, distributed and distance learning and expects those proposing such programs to do the same.

Council will use the following standards in its assessment of programs relying on blended, distributed or distance delivery modes.

#### **Institutional commitment**

##### **1. Institutional commitment**

The mandate or mission, the academic plan, the goals of the institution and its policies must be well matched to the programs offered, whatever their mode of delivery. The institution is obliged – administratively, financially and technically – to create and sustain a program for a period sufficient to enable all admitted learners to complete a degree in the published timeframe. That timeframe must be appropriate and relevant for the learners for whom the program is intended and for the specific area of study addressed by the program.

##### **2. Institutional ownership of the program**

The institution in which the learner is enrolled, not its contractors or partners, has an obligation to and a relationship with the learner. Although important elements of a program may be supplied by individuals or groups outside the institution or outsourced to other organizations or contractors, the responsibility for program quality remains with the credentialing institution(s), that is, the institution(s) awarding the degree.

### **3. Collaboration and joint delivery**

Council recognizes that institutions may enter into agreements with partners or consortia for programs that rely on blended, distributed and distance modes of delivery. In instances where several institutions are delivering a program jointly, the responsibility for program quality will be shared jointly, even though the onus for quality rests ultimately with the credentialing institution(s). It is therefore important that when adopting materials supplied by other institutions or developed within a consortium, the credentialing institution(s) negotiate permission to amend materials if changes are necessary to meet institutional standards of quality. Where collaboration or joint delivery of a program is contemplated, section 4.6 in Council's *Handbook* (collaborative degrees) should be considered.

### **4. Risk management and mitigation**

An institution using blended, distributed or distance learning modes should demonstrate that it has in place appropriate risk management provisions, including those that ensure that technological infrastructure is stable, reliable, well maintained and secure, that a disaster recovery plan is available in the event that servers or other technologies fail, and that learners will not be adversely affected should an agreement with a partner or contractor be abrogated.

### **5. Privacy, identity and confidentiality**

The institution recognizes that appropriate safeguards must be in place to assure the authentication of learner identity and the integrity of learner work in blended, distributed and distance programs. Documented procedures and appropriate storage protocols assure that security of personal information is protected in conducting assessments and evaluations and in the dissemination of results. It is equally important to establish procedures and timelines by which personal data no longer needed for authentication purposes will be destroyed.

### **6. Accessibility**

Given that learners have diverse learning needs, the institution should assure that the diverse needs of learners are appropriately addressed, and when necessary, accommodated.

### **7. Intellectual property**

The institution has policies to deal with the requirements of copyright and intellectual property laws and to address issues pertaining to digital rights management and appropriate use of learning object repositories.

### **8. Technology and renewal**

The technology used to administer and deliver the program, both pedagogically and administratively, is adequate to facilitate program delivery, and institutions are committed to appropriate updating of any technologies employed, and the identification and evaluation of emerging technologies. Sufficient resources need to be available for development and sustainability. The support for the building and maintenance of the technology for learning activities is maintained and supported and is as failsafe and secure as possible.

## **Program planning and design**

### **9. Appropriate planning**

There is a clear, well-understood process by which the program evolves from conception to approval to implementation to institutional review to continuous improvement. The instructional methods, modes of delivery and assessments of learning and feedback used should be aligned with articulated learning outcomes for the course or program.

## **10. Team/collaborative/networked learning**

Due consideration should be given to the substantial amount of learning that comes from peers, and to the implications of cohort models and other team, collaborative and networked learning environments.

## **11. Course development and evaluation**

Instructional and course materials should be reviewed regularly to ensure that they continue to meet the requirements and standards for the program. The intended learning outcomes should be reviewed regularly to ensure clarity and appropriateness, and their effectiveness evaluated through several appropriate methods.

## **Learners**

### **12. Advice to learners**

Learners are fully advised about the competencies, the self-discipline and the equipment they will need to have in order to participate in the program, and are provided with information about the programs, courses, required texts and/or materials and other requirements in a timely manner to enable them to acquire the materials for their course as it begins. Learners should also be informed of the costs associated with the mode of delivery of their program.

### **13. Learner support**

Learners are provided with training in how to use on-line tools, and are updated when changes are planned or implemented.

### **14. Hardware and software**

Procedures are in place to ensure that learners are supported in their use of the hardware and software required and have access to advice on these matters. In particular, before starting the program, learners are advised of the technical and time requirements (e.g., synchronous learning sessions).

### **15. Learner services**

Learners are informed about what learner services (e.g., academic advising, counseling) are available, if any, to assist them, and to address any complaints they have, or they are referred to the appropriate institutional documentation.

## **Academic Staff**

### **16. Oversight of program curricula**

Program curricula, assessment and oversight are the responsibility of academically qualified persons. The presentation, management, assessment and evaluation of the program are the responsibility of staff with appropriate academic qualifications.

### **17. Technology training**

All those involved in course design and delivery are adequately trained and assisted in the technology and pedagogy of on-line learning. Academic staff are assisted and supported in making the transition from classroom to online teaching or vice versa, and are assessed and mentored as they progress in their online teaching.

## **18. Technical support**

Academic staff are provided with an orientation to, and sufficient ongoing training/technical support for any hardware and software resources required in the program, and are also updated in a timely manner about any impending or actual changes that could affect their access to or involvement in their online programs.