

THE ROLE OF ACCREDITATION AND ASSURING QUALITY IN ELECTRONICALLY DELIVERED DISTANCE LEARNING

INSSTITUTIONAL (NATIONAL AND REGIONAL) AND PROGRAMMATIC (specialized) accreditors have been reviewing distance-based higher education since the establishment of correspondence schools more than 100 years ago.

With the advent of the World Wide Web and Internet-based distance learning, accreditors are now actively engaged in refining and applying their quality review practices to meet the needs of electronically delivered courses, programs and degrees. Fact Sheet #2 provides a brief description of the role of accreditation to assure quality as distance learning opportunities expand and diversify.

WHO OFFERS ELECTRONICALLY DELIVERED DISTANCE LEARNING?

- The United States Department of Education (USDE) reports that 1,680 institutions were offering distance learning in 1997-98. These institutions are accredited and enrolled 1.6 million distance learning students in 1997-98.¹

HOW IS DISTANCE LEARNING REVIEWED FOR QUALITY?

- Accreditation (external peer review of institutions and programs to assure and improve quality) is the primary means by which higher education distance learning offerings are currently reviewed for quality. Accreditors are responsible for scrutiny of distance learning for all higher education institutions and programs they review that offer education through distance.

¹ Distance Education at Postsecondary Education Institutions 1997-98, United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Report, NCES 2000-013, December 1999. Most recent data available

- 17 of the 19 (89.4%) “recognized” institutional accreditors (regional and national) are actively engaged in scrutinizing distance learning – applying accreditation standards, guidelines or policies to distance learning offerings and degrees to determine academic quality.² Where appropriate, accreditors have modified and expanded their practices to address unique features of distance learning.
- Accreditors do not employ identical review practices to assure quality in distance learning. Standards, policies and guidelines vary by the type of accreditor and the type of institution or program that is reviewed.

Regional Accreditation

The eight regional accrediting commissions are adopting a common platform for review of distance learning.³ This platform calls for scrutiny of teaching and learning, curriculum, student services, faculty and evaluation practices. The Statement and Best Practices affect approximately 3,000 colleges and universities:

- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Higher Education (www.msche.org)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (www.neasc.org)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Technical and Career Institutions (www.neasc.org)
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, The Higher Learning Commission (www.hlcommission.org)
- Northwest Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities; Commission on Colleges and Universities (www.nwccu.org)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (www.sacscoc.org)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (www.wascsenior.org)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities (www.wascsenior.org)

National Accreditation

The nine national accreditors have independently developed standards for distance learning. These standards are often accompanied by additional requirements from the accreditors such as special reports, expanded attention to student learning outcomes and special site visits. These standards affect more than 2,400 institutions:

² “Recognition” is a status achieved by accrediting organizations that have undergone a review of their quality and met the standards of either the USDE or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a private organization that coordinates regional, national and specialized accreditation.

³ Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs and Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs, 2001). Available from the Websites of the regional accreditors.

- One accreditor has developed new standards: Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (www.accsc.org)
- One accreditor reviews only distance learning operations: Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (www.deac.org)
- One accreditor has developed supplemental standards: Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (www.acics.org)
- Two accreditors have standards that specifically address extension offerings, alternative sites and delivery systems including distance learning: Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges, Commission on Accreditation (www.abhe.org) and Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, Commission on Accrediting (www.ats.edu)
- One accreditor has standards specifically for interactive distance learning: Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (www.accet.org)
- Three accreditors are using the same standards for review of distance learning that are used for site-based education: Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (www.abhes.org), Council on Occupational Education (www.council.org), Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools Accrediting Commission (www.tracs.org)

HOW ARE ACCREDITING ORGANIZATIONS HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR REVIEW OF QUALITY OF DISTANCE LEARNING?

- Both CHEA and USDE undertake recognition reviews of accreditors, including their distance learning activities, on a periodic basis. In addition, accreditors that develop new standards or policies for distance learning may undergo a special review.
- CHEA recognition standards are applied to accreditors' standards, policy and guidelines for all types of educational delivery, including distance learning. These standards include attention to advancing academic quality, demonstrating accountability and encouraging needed quality improvement.
- USDE recognition standards are applied to accreditors' standards, policy and guidelines for all types of educational delivery, including distance learning. These standards include attention to recruitment and admission practices, fiscal and administrative capacity and facilities.



A national advocate and institutional voice for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation, CHEA is an association of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations.

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