هيئة تقويم التعليم والتدريب
Education & Training Evaluation Commission

Academic Accreditation Standards for E-Learning and Distance Education Institutions and Programs

It was approved by the commission's Board of Directors at their third meeting (Second Round) on 6/1/1442 – 25/8/2020.

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Introduction

The interest in education has witnessed a remarkable increase both locally and internationally. This enhanced the desire to find several methods and various technologies that help make education available to the largest segment of beneficiaries while maintaining its value and usefulness. Education thus contributes to making a tangible impact on the national economy and development, and helps to prepare distinguished human cadres. In addition, modern technologies have been largely used, thus leading to the emergence of new patterns of teaching and learning. Such patterns contribute to developing learner interaction, achieving flexibility, developing skills, and promoting the values of "self-learning", "continuous learning" and "lifelong learning" in a manner that is highly commensurate with learner needs and observe individual differences between learners. Despite the many advantages that can be achieved by e-learning and distance education, there are many quality assurance standards that must be observed in this type of teaching and learning, whether at the level of the awarding institutions, or at the level of academic programs themselves, in order to achieve the required purpose. This aspect has received great attention from international quality agencies and organizations.

The Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC) is in charge of evaluation, assessment and accreditation of qualifications in education and training in the public and private sectors in Saudi Arabia, seeking to improve their quality and efficiency and enhance their contribution to the national economy and development. This role is stipulated in the Decree issued by the Council of Ministers Resolution No. (108), dated 14/2/1440H. The authorities of the Commission, as set forth in Article (4) of the Decree, include (1) building systems for evaluation and institutional and programmatic accreditation in education and training; this includes approval and application of the rules, standards, frameworks, indicators, conditions, and procedures of such systems; (2) evaluating the performance of schools, higher education institutions and training institutions, and granting accreditation to such institutions periodically, according to the standards approved by the Board; (3) evaluating degree programs offered by education and training institutions, and granting accreditation to such institutions periodically, according to the standards approved by the Board. Based on such authorities, ETEC issued the "Academic Accreditation Standards for E-learning and Distance Education Institutions and Programs."

This document provides an account of the e-learning and distance education quality assurance and accreditation standards to be applied to all post-secondary education programs offered across all types of e-learning or full or blended distance education, whether they are applied at the level of the program or for one or more of its courses. This would help to gain the trust of the local and international community in the quality of the Saudi education system, increase demand for it, ensure the quality of its graduates, prepare graduates for better job opportunities upon their graduation, and enable them to successfully engage in life and the job market.

In order to develop these standards, ETEC has relied on several pillars, notably the following: 1. supporting the national trends towards higher education; 2. focusing on outcomes and effectiveness; 3. observing the level of maturity reached by higher education institutions in the Kingdom in the field of quality assurance; 4. ensuring consistency with global practices, while giving space for more creativity and excellence to higher education institutions; 5. achieving the balance between cost and effectiveness.

The standards have been designed according to the following methodology: 1. Reality analysis, including identification of national needs, organizational arrangements for the work of different entities, the current situation of higher education institutions, traditional programs and programs offered in different types of learning, in addition to the current standards for institutional and programmatic accreditation, in order to achieve consistency and integration and avoid repetition; 2. benchmarking with international best practices to achieve e-learning and distance education quality assurance; 3. ensuring the engagement of stakeholders in the preparation period and taking their views; 4. arbitrating the document by local and international experts in the field of e-learning and distance education quality assurance.

The quality assurance and accreditation standards for e-learning and distance education institutions and programs have been designed to achieve integration at several levels. The first level includes identifying actual needs and the ability of the institutions and the programs to provide the service, while the second level comprises the quality of application based on planning and reviewing the quality of outcomes, in accordance with the following description:

First Level : Provisional Accreditation (Need Identification): Provisional accreditation is based on the availability of specific requirements and standards both at the institutional and programmatic levels. Institutional accreditation focuses on the target role of an institution represented by the connection of this type of learning with the institutional mission and objectives, the application of policies and regulations that ensure its seriousness and quality, the provision of an adequate and appropriate technical infrastructure and qualified human resources, and the use of mechanisms to ensure academic integrity, intellectual property rights, performance quality follow-up, and benchmarking. On the other hand, provisional programmatic accreditation is based on the extent to which these programs are required to be opened and on pre-emptive quality control, through careful planning of the program, accurate specification of its intended learning outcomes, ensuring the appropriateness of teaching strategies and evaluation methods to maximize the achievement of the program learning outcomes, and the availability of human resources, learning resources and basic equipment which ensure the achievement of program objectives. This could help to increase the readiness of the program for academic accreditation so as to achieve the targeted academic effectiveness and the required efficiency, guarantee the rights of the community and students, and contribute to meeting the needs of the job market.

Second Level: Programmatic Accreditation: It depends on reviewing performance and the quality of learning outcomes after the program completes a full cycle, and verifying the quality of program outcomes and their correspondence with the actual plans, in addition to identifying the strengths, weaknesses and areas of improvement through conducting an ana-

lytical evaluation of its development, performance and continuous improvement.

These standards will be applied by the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation (NCAAA) at ETEC, in coordination and integration with the National E-Learning Center. According to the decree No. 35 issued by the Council of Ministers Resolution in 13/1/1439H, the National E-Learning Center is in charge of granting licenses to the agencies and companies offering e-learning and distance education programs and giving accredited certificates. It seeks to achieve integration between the technical and academic aspects, which should bring about positive impacts on the quality of programs and contribute to achieving their objectives. The following controls will be observed in academic quality governance:

1)   An institution wishing to provide e-learning and distance education programs should be institutionally accredited by the NCAAA at ETEC.

2)   An institution wishing to provide e-learning and distance education programs should meet additional institutional standards for e-learning (Chapter 1 of this document).

3)   A program should apply for provisional (initial) accreditation after obtaining the licensure and before the mid of the program duration to ensure that it has achieved the minimum level of quality standards (Chapter 2 of this document).

4)   An e-learning/distance education program should obtain programmatic academic accreditation within a period of six months to one year from the date of graduation of the first batch of students (Chapter 3 of this document).

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Terminology

Online Learning

Online learning involves an internet connection and may include face-to-face encounters using technologies such as virtual seminars, lectures and meetings, along with employing online learning techniques (such as online curricula or conference applications).

E-Learning

E-learning uses digital tools for teaching and learning, such as the technologies used to facilitate learning processes. It can be carried out through the Internet, or within the usual classrooms without having to connect to the Internet.

Distance Education

Distance education aims to provide learning opportunities to students in all locations. Instructions and directions are provided to students in distance locations from those of the teaching faculty. This pattern is not limited to online learning or e-learning as it uses multiple alternatives, (such as exchanging letters and publications, worksheets, manuscripts and reports, and telephone and e-mail communication).

Institutional Accreditation

It is an official recognition granted by the NCAAA at ETEC that an institution has met the conditions and criteria for institutional accreditation within a specific time.

Provisional Programmatic Accreditation

It refers to accreditation granted by the NCAAA at ETEC to new or existing programs that have not obtained accreditation yet, provided that the first batch of students has not graduated yet.

Programmatic Accreditation

It is an official recognition granted by the NCAAA at ETEC that a program can prepare students/trainees in a specific educational field, and that it meets the approved conditions and standards for programmatic accreditation within a specific time.
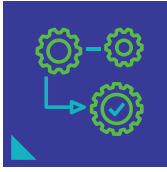
Chapter 1:
Institutional Accreditation

A higher education institution wishing to provide e-learning and distance education programs is required to be institutionally accredited by the NCAAA at ETEC before applying for licensing. In addition, a higher education institution that offers e-learning and distance education programs should meet the following additional indicators for distance education. In numbering these indicators, it was observed that it completes the numbering used in the institutional accreditation standards of the NCAAA[1]. Six indicators were reviewed to adapt to e-learning and distance education, and 23 specialized indicators related to the quality of e-learning and distance education were added (marked with *).

Institutional Standards of E-learning and Distance Education

1. Mission, Vision and Strategic Planning

1.2 Vision and Strategic Planning

1.2.3 The institution's strategic plan should include clear and specific strategic objectives for ensuring the effectiveness of e-learning and distance education activities, and be linked to specific performance indicators.

*1.2.4 The institution should develop a clear e-learning and distance education strategy that is aligned with the institution strategic plan and reviewed on a regular basis.

2. Governance, Leadership and Management

2.2 Leadership and Management

*2.2.9 The institution should have sufficient capacity to manage e-learning and distance education and led by qualified and trained personnel with the required experience.

2.5 Quality Assurance Management

2.5.6 The institution should carry out benchmarking of its institutional performance and the performance of its academic and administrative units with reference to similar institutions that offer the same pattern of e-learning or distance education.

3. Teaching and Learning

3.1 Designing and Developing Academic Programs

*3.1.10 The institution should only use distance education with appropriate academic programs for this type of education. The teaching and learning methods should match the objectives of its educational programs, the content of the courses it provides, and the current and future needs of its students.

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1) https://etec.gov.sa/ar/productsandservices/NCAAA/Accreditation/Pages/Accreditationstandardsdeve.aspx

*3.1.11 The institution should ensure that the academic program content is designed by experts in e-learning and distance education in collaboration with experts in the field of specialization.

*3.1.12 The institution should ensure that the e-learning courses and electronic educational materials prepared by other entities are in line with the educational requirements in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

*3.1.13 The institution should, in the design of courses and electronic educational materials, provide information, advice, and opportunity for staff to explore new technologies and new uses of current learning technologies in support of distance learning and teaching. Course design should consider how to provide students with reliable content and the ability for students to communicate with one another as well as with a faculty member.

*3.1.14 The institution should provide sufficient educational assistance to ensure students' understanding, interaction and ability to apply what they have learned and should evaluate such assistance periodically.

3.3 Quality Assurance and Improvement of Academic Programs

3.3.8 The institution should develop processes to ensure appropriate and consistent standards of course quality and outstanding student experience across all distance education offerings. The level of student achievement of learning outcomes should be examined with reference to standards and comparison with the performance of students in similar institutions that offer e-learning/distance education in the same field.

*3.3.10 The institution should state procedures for submitting and documenting student activities, and for maintaining confidentiality and information security.

*3.3.11 The institution should set and apply appropriate administrative policies and procedures for conducting electronic remote testing and assessment. There should be procedures that ensure reliable supervision of such tests; it should verify the identity of students taking the test and make sure that the student is enrolled in the program.

*3.3.12 The institution should provide suitable electronic services and infrastructure environment for courses and programs offered by e-learning and distance education, and should meet the criteria for such methods.

3.6 Learning Resources

*3.6.8 The institution should provide students with directions and guidelines on how to access and use electronic educational materials, how to make effective use of the information technology systems, and how to manage learning and administrative and technical requirements remotely.

*3.6.9 The institution must, based on the nature of its programs, provide electronic or virtual laboratories, or conclude agreements with local institutions available to students.

4. Students

4.1 Student Admission

*4.1.5 The student admission process should include an assessment of their technical skills and competencies and their ability to access the technology required for learning.

*4.1.6 The institution should clearly communicate to prospective students the requirements concerning equipment, e-learning and digital skills, pre-knowledge and prerequisite subjects as well as attendance and workload.

4.2 Student Records

*4.2.5 The institution should apply effective policies and procedures to verify student identity and ensure that the student registered in the program is the same one who attends courses and submits activities and tests.

4.5 International Students

*4.5.4 The institution should take into account the time difference in simultaneous teaching, learning and evaluation processes if this institution offers a program for students in other countries with different time zone.

4.6 Student Services and Activities

*4.6.6 The institution should provide opportunities for interaction and exchange of experiences between students in order to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

*4.6.7 The institution should ensure the provision of full academic support for students studying at a distance on a comparable basis to students studying on campus. The various means of communication available to students should be clearly explained to all concerned.

*4.6.8 The institution should provide student support programs and services that reflect the characteristics of e-learning/ distance learning; including the necessary support to develop digital skills to use the virtual learning environment (VLE) and different educational tools effectively.

5. Teaching Faculty and Administrative Staff

5.2. Career Development and Evaluation

5.2.3 The institution should provide fair and appropriate opportunities for professional and personal development to the teaching faculty and administrative staff. This should include information, advice, and the opportunity for staff to explore current learning technologies and new technologies in support of e-learning and distance education.

6. Institutional Resources

6.2 Information Technology

*6.2.10 The institution should provide a suitable learning management system (LMS).

*6.2.11 The institution should ensure the application of policies for the appropriate use of communication technologies and internet services and make them available to stu-

dents and teaching faculty.

*6.2.12 The institution should operate its website in a way that facilitates student access to e-learning and distance education systems, programs and services.

6.4 Safety and Risk Management

*6.4.7 The institution should apply cyber security controls and standards issued by the National Cyber Security Authority in order to protect against any information threats.

7. Scientific Research and Innovation

7.1 Scientific Research Planning and Management

7.1.2 The institution should apply mechanisms to identify the priorities of scientific research, including research and development in the field of e-learning and distance education, and follow up on the application of such mechanisms.

7.2 Supporting Scientific Research and Innovation

7.2.2 The institution should allocate a sufficient budget so as to be able to accomplish its research plan, including research in the field of e-learning and distance education.

Chapter 2:
Provisional (initial) Programmatic Accreditation

In order for an e-learning and distance education program to obtain provisional accreditation, the higher education institution is required to be institutionally accredited by the NCAAA at ETEC including the application of the e-learning and distance education indicators applicable to the institutional domain, which are referred to in Chapter 1, as well as meeting the following e-learning and distance education standards and indicators. The program should be licensed and apply for provisional accreditation before the mid of its duration as well as provides plans to ensure that it will be offered with acceptable quality measures, and that it will be eligible to apply for accreditation once it graduates the first cohort. This entails providing documents including program specifications and course specifications according to the requirements of the National Qualifications Framework.

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Provisional Accreditation Standards for E-Learning and Distance Education Programs

1. Program Mission and Objectives

1.1 The mission of the program should be clear, appropriate and approved. It should be consistent with the mission of the institution and the college, and with the needs of the society and national orientations.

1.2 Objectives of the program should be consistent with the mission. They should be clear, realistic and measurable.

2. Program Management and Quality Assurance

2.1 The program should have an organizational structure and specialized boards with specific and approved tasks and authorities.

2.2 The program should have a sufficient number of qualified staff to carry out administrative, professional and technical tasks and undertake educational supervision.

2.3 The program should have clear codes of practice to enforce the values of integrity, fairness and equality; and maintain intellectual property rights in all academic, administrative and technical practices.

2.4 Student appeal, grievance, complaints, and disciplinary cases procedures should be specified in regulations, including mechanisms to ensure their fair application.

2.5 Management of the Program Quality Assurance should have specific guidelines and procedures that are consistent with the institutional quality management system.

2.6 The program should have a procedures and guidelines for presenting the digital academic content in an organized (facilitating movement between its parts), fair (ensuring access to

all members), and varied (multiple audio-visual) manner.

3. Teaching and Learning

3.1 The program should accurately and formally specify the ttributes of its graduates and its targeted learning outcomes in accordance with its mission and in line with the attributes of its graduates at the institutional level.

3.2 The program learning outcomes should be aligned with the requirements of the National Qualifications Framework, the academic and professional standards, and labor market.

3.3 Curricula should be consistent with the program objectives and learning outcomes and with scientific, technical and professional developments and new trendsin the field of specialization.

3.4 Course learning outcomes should be clearly aligned to the program liearning outcomes.

3.5 Teaching and learning strategies and assessment methods should vary according to its nature and level. They should be aligned with the intended learning outcomes at the program and course levels and with cumulative learning requirements.

4. Students

4.1 The program should have approved requirements and conditions for student admission and registration, including previous knowledge and the minimum level of technical skills and competencies required to enroll in e-learning and distance education, in accordance with program nature.

4.2 The program should provide the basic information that students need, such as study requirements, services, financial costs (if any), grievance procedures, complaints and discipline, in a variety of ways.

5. Teaching Faculty

5.1 The program should have appropriate policies and procedures for recruting qualified faculty members in the program.

5.2 The program should have a sufficient number of faculty members with the necessary competencies (including qualifications, certificates, professional licenses, previous experience, professional experience, and skills). There should be appropriate mechanisms for verifying such documents.

6. Learning Resources, Facilities and Equipment

6.1 The program should have clear policies and procedures to ensure the provision of adequate and appropriate learning resources and services to support student learning.

6.2 The program should have a digital library and specialized electronic resources (such as digital references, multimedia, software, databases, information sources, research materials and academic journals) as well as appropriate electronic systems that allow beneficiaries to access information.

6.3 The program should have digital learning management systems.

Chapter 3:
Programmatic Academic Accreditation

After an e-learning/distance education program is licensed by the National E-Learning Center, this program should obtain programmatic academic accreditation within a period of six months to one year from the graduation of the first batch of students. Application for accreditation is made according to the same procedures of programmatic accreditation used at the National Center for Academic Assessment and Accreditation, and pursuant to the same criteria used (2018 Edition)[2]. Seventeen indicators have been reviewed to adapt to e-learning and distance education, and two indicators directly related to e-learning and distance education have been added. The new indicators are indicated by an asterisk "*" in the full version of the standards, and the numbering used in the 2018 Edition has been completed.

Updated and Additional E-Learning and Distance Education Programmatic Accreditation Indicators

2. Program Management and Quality Assurance

2.1 Program Management

2.1.2 The program management should have the appropriate academic, administrative and technical experience to achieve its mission and objectives.

2.1.3 The program should have a sufficient number of qualified staff to carry out administrative, professional and technical duties; The Program staff should have specific responsibilities and authorities.

2.1.4 The program administration should provide a supportive organizational climate and academic and digital environment.

2.1.6 The program should apply the institutional regulations of educational and research partnership (if any) in order to ensure a high quality of all the aspects of the program offered through e-learning or distance education, including courses, educational materials, teaching, student achievement standards and services provided.

2.1.12 The program should form an advisory committee comprising professional and experienced members in the same specialization of the program and in e-learning and distance education mechanisms. These committee members should contribute to evaluating and developing the program and improving its performance.

2.1.13 The program administration should improve and develop the professional and digital skills and capabilities of the technical and administrative support staff to keep pace with modern developments.

2.1.17 The program administration should enforce the values of academic integrity, intellectual property rights and rules of ethical conduct in all academic, technical, research, administrative and service fields and activities.

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2) https://etec.gov.sa/ar/productsandservices/NCAAA/AccreditationProgrammatic/Pages/insprogdeve.aspx.

2.2 Program Quality Assurance

2.2.1 The program administration should apply an effective quality assurance and management system that is consistent with the institutional quality system and with the nature of the e-learning and distance education programs.

3. Teaching and Learning

3.1 Graduate Attributes and Learning Outcomes

3.1.5 The program should ensure that its core learning outcomes can be acquired effectively through virtual e-learning activities or independently through distance education, or in combination with other educational activities, such as seminars, laboratory activities, field experience requiring supervision, etc.

3.2 Curricula

3.2.1 The program is committed to the institutional policies, standards, and procedures in the design, development and modification of the curriculum

3.2.9 Teaching and learning strategies should be student-centered and encourage active, independent learning.

3.2.11 If some e-learning courses include practical components, or if the program includes a field experience, their learning outcomes should be specified and aligned with the learning outcomes of the program; and appropriate strategies for training, assessment, and training venues are identified in order to achieve these outcomes.

3.3 Teaching Quality and Student Evaluation

3.3.2 Teaching faculty shoud be provided with the necessary training in effective use of technology, in teaching and learning strategies, and in assessment methods specified in the program and course specifications in a manner that fits e-learning and distance education. Faculty use of such techniques should be monitored on a regular basis.

3.3.3 At the beginning of each course, students should be provided with comprehensive information on that course and on how to proceed successfully with it; this should include the mechanism to access the course, its intended learning outcomes (ILOs), teaching and learning strategies, evaluation methods and dates, and what is expected of students during the course study.

4. Students

4.0.7 Students should be provided with effective services for academic, professional, psychological and social counseling and guidance that are in line with the nature of the program, through qualified and sufficient personnel.

5. Teaching Faculty

5.0.3 Faculty members should have the required competencies (such as qualifications, certificates, professional licenses, necessary experience, and high technical skills) and teaching effectiveness; appropriate mechanisms should be applied for verification.

6. Learning Resources, Facilities and Equipment

6.0.10 The program should have a sufficient number of qualified technicians and specialists to create and operate the required technical environment.

*6.0.14 Course design should allow for both synchronous and asynchronous learning.

*6.0.15 A program should have a procedure guide for how to use the learning platform (the learning management system) and how to handle digital content in an organized (facilitating movement between its parts), fair (ensuring access to all beneficiaries), and varied (multiple audio-visual) manner.

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