

Reviewing Distance Delivery during Comprehensive Evaluations and Comprehensive Quality Reviews

In addition to reviewing distance delivery through its substantive change processes, HLC reviews the quality of distance-delivered programs during comprehensive evaluations and Comprehensive Quality Reviews. This document provides background on HLC's policies related to distance delivery and the protocol for reviewing distance-delivered programs, both distance and correspondence education, during accreditation visits.

Background

Purpose of the Review

HLC no longer requires approval of individual distance-delivered courses and programs, and reviewers no longer recommend approval of such programs. Recently HLC retired the stipulations limiting institutions to percentages of total degree programs. Instead, HLC and peer reviewers evaluate the institution's capacity for distance-delivered education.

Substantive Change Review

Through the substantive change process, HLC determines whether an institution may initiate or expand distance or correspondence education by examining an institution's (a) commitment to, planning for, and implementation of distance delivery; (b) current and ongoing capacity and resources to implement high-quality educational offerings and services through distance delivery; and (c) effective systems for sustaining and improving high-quality distance-delivered education through effective assessment, evaluation, and improvement processes. HLC may conduct a substantive change review within a comprehensive evaluation or Comprehensive Quality Review.

Comprehensive Evaluation and Comprehensive Quality Reviews

HLC reviews the ongoing quality of distance-delivered education during comprehensive evaluations and Comprehensive Quality Reviews. During these accreditation

visits, peer reviewers examine the institution's capacity to provide education to its students and the quality of its performance in doing so, whether via distance delivery or traditional face-to-face modes. Comprehensive reviews examine curriculum; staffing; support services; access to appropriate laboratory and library resources; processes for ongoing planning, evaluation and improvement; and all other facets of quality higher education for all instruction wherever and however delivered.

Definitions of Distance and Correspondence Education

HLC's definition of "Distance Delivery" encompasses both distance and correspondence education, thus aligning with the federal government's definitions. The following are the federal definitions (2009) of distance and correspondence education:

Correspondence education means:

1. Education provided through one or more courses by an institution under which the institution provides instructional materials, by mail or electronic transmission, including examinations on the materials, to students who are separated from the instructor.
2. Interaction between the instructor and the student is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student.
3. Correspondence courses are typically self-paced.
4. Correspondence education is not distance education.

Distance Education means:

education that uses one or more of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (4) to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously. The technologies may include:

1. The internet;
2. One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;
3. Audio conferencing; or
4. Video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, if the cassettes, DVDs, or CD-ROMs are used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (3).

Definitions of Distance-Delivered Courses and Programs

HLC uses the following definitions when applying its policy on distance delivery to its accredited and candidate institutions:

Distance-delivered courses are those in which all or the vast majority (typically 75% or more) of the instruction and interaction occurs via electronic communication, correspondence or equivalent mechanisms, with the faculty and students physically separated from each other.

Distance-delivered programs are those certificate or degree programs in which 50% or more of the required courses may be taken as distance-delivered courses.

Distance-delivered Stipulations

HLC has identified the following stipulations for determining the scope of distance delivery by an institution. HLC determines the appropriate category for each institution based on information provided by the institution in the Institutional Update or when it seeks and receives approval of a proposed change. Per HLC's Institutional Change policy, programs new to the institution may require approval by HLC prior to being offered to students and regardless of the method of delivery. Institutions offering courses but not yet offering distance-delivered programs must follow the procedures for notification by submitting

the [Distance Education survey](#). See the separate Program Change Application for additional information or discuss the proposed change with the institution's HLC liaison.

Stipulations for distance education include:

- The institution has not been approved for distance education.
- Approval for distance education is limited to courses.
- Approval for distance education is limited to courses and one program.
- Approved for distance education courses and programs.

Stipulations for correspondence education include:

- The institution has not been approved for correspondence education.
- Approval for correspondence education is limited to courses.
- Approval for correspondence education is limited to courses and one program.
- Approved for correspondence education courses and programs.

HLC policy requires an institution to seek prior approval if it plans to initiate or expand its distance-delivered offerings as described below.

Initiation occurs and a substantive change review is required when the institution:

- Plans to initiate its first distance or correspondence education courses.
- Plans to initiate its first distance education certificate or degree program, even when it has been approved to offer correspondence education certificate or degree programs.
- Plans to initiate its first correspondence education certificate or degree program, even when it has been approved to offer distance education certificate or degree programs.

Expansion occurs and a substantive change review is required when the institution plans to increase its current activity in distance education degree programs or its current activity in correspondence education degree programs thus requiring a different stipulation.

In addition, HLC may require a substantive change evaluation if the institution has never had a focused review of distance or correspondence certificate or degree programs

and is offering one or more programs or has a significant annual increase in enrollment.

Protocol for Reviewing Distance Delivery

During comprehensive evaluations and Comprehensive Quality Reviews, one or more trained members of the team should examine distance-delivered education and incorporate the results of the review in the comprehensive evaluation or Comprehensive Quality Review visit report as instructed in the appropriate team report template.

The evaluation should include a review of elements 1 through 7 below, which are linked to the Criteria and Core Components. The focus of the evaluation is to assure the institutional capacity; educational quality; student learning and success; and effective planning, evaluation, and improvement processes, including those for assessing and improving student learning, persistence and completion. In conducting the evaluation, peer reviewers should:

- Review the scope, number and types of distance and correspondence education programs offered by the institution as provided in HLC's data information and the institution's evaluation materials. Alert the institution to any discrepancies.
- Review the institution's history and approvals for conducting distance and correspondence education. Alert the institution and HLC if the institution is operating outside its approval limits.
- Secure access to the institution's learning management system. Evaluate a sample of programs and courses within the system to assure educational quality, student support and verification of student identity. This review should also serve the purposes of the Federal Compliance review.

Peer reviewers should anticipate needing a few hours to a half day to conduct the review of distance delivery and may choose to conduct a portion or the majority of the evaluation electronically prior to the on-site visit. In addition, questions pertaining to distance delivery should be incorporated into other appropriate meetings and interviews during the evaluation.

In conducting the evaluation, peer reviewers should refer to the appropriate report template and reviewer guide.

In all cases, reviewers will consider the following:

1. **Scope of Distance-delivered Courses and Programs (Criteria 1, 2, 3, and 5; Core Components 1.B, 1.D, 2.A, 2.B., 3.A., 3.C, 5.A, 5.C)**
 1. The scope of distance-delivered degree and diploma programs in relationship to stipulation the institution is authorized to operate within as set by HLC.
 2. The scope of the institution's distance-delivered courses and programs (degree, diploma, certificate) and their relationship to and impact on the institution, its constituencies, and its mission.
 3. Organizational structures in place to ensure effective oversight, implementation and management of the institution's distance-delivered offerings.
 4. Consortial or contractual arrangements in conjunction with distance-delivered offerings and processes to assure their integrity and quality.
2. **Institution's History with Distance-Delivered Offerings (Criteria 1, 4, and 5; Core Components 1.A, 1.B, 4.A., 4.C, 5.C., 5.D.)**
 1. The institution's experience with distance-delivered offerings.
 2. Plans for future growth short-term and long-term and for managing growth.
3. **Institutional Planning for Distance-Delivered Offerings. (Criteria 2, 3, 4, and 5; Core Components 2.A, 2.B, 3.A, 4.A, 5.A, 5.B, 5.C)**
 1. Processes for determining the need to offer or to expand programs via distance delivery.
 2. Processes for planning and managing financial resources and their allocation for distance-delivered offerings.
 3. Processes to assure that promotion, marketing and enrollment of its distance-delivered offerings are appropriate, accurate, and transparent to students and the public.
4. **Curriculum and Instructional Design (Criteria 2, 3 and 4; Core Components 2.E, 3.A, 3.B, 3.C., 4.A)**
 1. Processes for developing, approving, and assuring quality curricula for distance-delivered programs.
 2. Processes for technology maintenance, upgrades, back up, remote services and for communicating changes

in software, hardware or technical systems to students and faculty.

3. Processes to provide convenient, reliable and timely services to students or faculty needing technical assistance, and to communicate information about these services.

5. Staffing and Faculty Support (Criteria 2, 3, and 4; Core Components 2.D, 2.E, 3.C, 3.D)

1. Processes to ensure sufficient faculty and staff for distance-delivered programs.
2. Processes for selecting, training and orienting faculty for distance delivery.
3. Practices and procedures of distance delivery faculty and staff and their alignment with those of face-to-face faculty and staff and with institutional policies and processes.

6. Student Support (Criteria 2, 3, and 4; Core Components 2.A, 3.C, 3.D., 3.E, 4.C)

1. Access to necessary student and support services.
2. Appropriate materials and communications for students regarding distance-delivered programs.
3. Access to faculty, including processes that promote interactions among distance delivery students and faculty.
4. Processes that protect student identity and personal information and assure student authentication and identity.

7. Evaluation and Assessment (Criteria 3, 4, and 5; Core Components 3.A, 4.A, 4.B, 4.C, 5.A, 5.C, 5.D)

1. Processes to evaluate and improve quality in distance-delivered offerings.
2. Processes for assessing and improving student learning and evaluating and improving student retention and completion.
3. Assessment and evaluation methods used for distance-delivered offerings and their equivalence to those used in traditional face-to-face offerings.

Incorporating the Evaluation into the Report

Peer reviewers should follow the outline provided in the comprehensive evaluation and Comprehensive Quality Review report templates.

Comprehensive evaluation report

In the appropriate criterion sections, the team should include five to seven separate evidentiary statements that specifically address distance delivery. The team's findings on distance delivery should become part of the deliberations on the Criteria and should bear as appropriate on the accreditation recommendation. In addition, the team will affirm that the institution is operating within the approved percentage bracket of distance and correspondence education in relationship to total degree programs in the Conclusion section.

Comprehensive Quality Review report

In the Comprehensive Quality Review report, the team will provide its conclusions on distance and correspondence education in the designated section. In addition, the team will affirm that the institution is operating within the approved stipulation related to distance and correspondence education.

Protocol for Evaluating Change Requests Embedded in Comprehensive Reviews

If an institution has requested that a substantive change review on distance delivery be conducted as part of a comprehensive review or Comprehensive Quality Review visit, the institution will provide a completed *Distance Delivery Change Application* in addition to its other self-evaluation materials. In addition, the team will complete a separate embedded change report and recommendation. The applications and report templates can be found on HLC's website (www.hlcommission.org).