
Policy on the Review of Distance Education

The last several decades have seen the emergence and increased use of technology for instruction by member colleges and universities. These initiatives have enhanced the capacity of many institutions to meet the needs of more students and to provide a wider range of educational opportunities to their traditional student populations.

This policy statement has been developed to: (1) assist institutions as they develop distance education courses and programs and seek to improve the quality of their distance education activities; and (2) provide a basis for the Commission’s review of distance education programming, in keeping with the Policy on Substantive Change.

Definition of Distance Education

Consistent with federal regulations, the Commission defines distance education as education that uses one or more of the following technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor(s) and to support regular and substantive interaction between students and the instructor(s), either synchronously or asynchronously:

- (a) the internet;
- (b) one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;
- (c) audio conference;
- (d) other media used in a course in conjunction with any of the above technologies.

A program using any of the technologies listed above for any portion of the program is considered a distance education program.

“Regular and substantive” interaction between instructor(s) and students is defined as engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment that is consistent with the content of the course or competency under discussion and that includes at least two of the following:

- (a) providing direct instruction;
- (b) assessing or providing feedback on a student’s coursework;
- (c) providing information or responding to questions about content;
- (d) facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of the course or competency.

Institutions are expected to ensure regular and substantive interaction by providing opportunities for such interaction on a predictable and scheduled basis and by monitoring students’ academic engagement and success and ensuring that instructors engage promptly and proactively in substantive interaction when needed on the basis of such monitoring or upon request by the student.

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Substantive Change

The first time an institution offers a Title IV-eligible certificate or degree program for which 50% or more of the credits may be earned via any of the technologies listed above, it must submit a substantive change proposal to the Commission. The proposal must be approved by the Commission before the program(s) can be included within the scope of the institution's accreditation by the New England Commission of Higher Education. The proposal should demonstrate that these activities fulfill the *Standards for Accreditation* and relevant Commission policies, including (if applicable) the Policy on Contractual Arrangements Involving Courses and Programs. For assistance in developing its proposal, the institution should follow the directions in "Guidelines for Preparing Substantive Change Reports on the Establishment of Academic Programming Offered Through Distance Education." Institutions should also consult the 21st Century Distance Education Guidelines. Both of these documents are available on the Commission's website.

The institution's substantive change proposal will be reviewed by the Commission at its next regularly scheduled meeting following the proposal's receipt, provided it is received by the published deadline. The range of possible actions includes approval of the report and inclusion of the programming in the institution's accreditation and specification of future monitoring if necessary; conferral of general approval to offer distance education programming within the scope of the institution's mission; deferral of action; and rejection of the proposal. The institution will be notified of the action taken shortly after the Commission meets.

Ongoing Monitoring

As a part of the interim (fifth-year) report required of all colleges and universities on a ten-year evaluation cycle, the institution is expected to apprise the Commission of any significant developments regarding its distance education programming as outlined in the relevant procedural document on interim reports.

Distance education programming will be specifically reviewed through the comprehensive evaluation. The institution is expected to appropriately address such matters in its self-study.

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November 2003
July 2009
July 2020
September 2021