

Transparency by Design: Principles of Good Practice for Higher Education Institutions Serving Adults at a Distance

These Principles were developed to ensure that higher education courses and programs for adults learning at a distance are of high quality and readily accessible. Distance programs are those that enable the student to learn at any time and in any place and serve adult learners at a distance, including learners who have traditional options but find online delivery more convenient.

The Principles are founded on best practices in distance higher education and address the unique needs of adult learners. The Principles define parameters of excellence; promote transparency of higher education institutions delivering distance learning programs; and foster dialogue to strengthen and improve the quality of programs and services. The Principles facilitate the continuous improvement of adult higher education programs delivered at a distance by establishing benchmarks of quality.

Principle 1. Mission, Goals, and Objectives

The delivery of distance higher education programs to adults is consistent with the institution's mission statement and statement of goals and objectives. The institution ensures that quality assurance in distance education programs is an integral part of its mission, goals and objectives. The mission, goals and objectives are widely promulgated, visible, and undergo periodic review.

Principle 2. Accountability to Stakeholders

The institution demonstrates its accountability to stakeholders by openly sharing aggregate learning assessment results, quality indicators, and academic program reviews of its distance education courses and programs.

Principle 3. Responsiveness

The institution demonstrates responsiveness toward adult learners with respect to programmatic, administrative, and academic processes.

Principle 4. Curriculum Development and Revision

The institution has established processes to accomplish its curriculum development, revision, and quality assurance that are grounded in distance learning instructional design and curriculum planning principles and include periodic program (internal and external) and course reviews. The institution directly reviews and is responsible for the currency and quality of all outsourced program components.

Principle 5. Curriculum Delivery

The institution ensures that the content and quality of its courses and programs are comparable regardless of delivery method. The distance delivery model(s), course materials, and technology are appropriate to the content and needs of the student; and do not create barriers to learning.

Principle 6. Interaction and Student Engagement

The institution ensures that distance education courses are designed to optimize interaction between the faculty and adult students, among students, and between students; and the course content is designed to encourage critical thinking, problem solving, and mastery through student engagement in the learning process.

Principle 7. Faculty Qualifications and Training

The institution ensures that all faculty members engaged in distance delivery to adults meet the academic qualifications and standards required by the institution's accrediting and oversight bodies. The institution trains, certifies, and supports faculty who teach distance higher education courses in the appropriate use of distance learning pedagogy, delivery methods, instructional technology, and the unique needs of adult learners. "Certifies" means a process that confirms a faculty member is prepared with the appropriate skills to teach adults at a distance.

Principle 8. Faculty Evaluation

The institution has clear, consistent policies, measures, and procedures to evaluate the performance and needs of faculty members who teach distance education courses and uses the results for assuring instructional quality.

Principle 9. Student Evaluation

The institution has clearly articulated measures in place to evaluate in a timely manner the performance of distance adult students. The institution publishes a grading policy that includes instructions for issuance and completion of incomplete grades and for withdrawing from a course.

Principle 10. Learning Outcomes Assessment

The institution articulates student learning outcomes independent of delivery method, has a systematic and ongoing process for assessing student learning, and provides evidence that the results are used to improve programs, curricula, instruction, faculty development, and services.

Principle 11. Institutional Integrity

The institution is regionally accredited. The institution complies with the notification requirements of its accrediting agency whenever major changes (as determined by that agency) are made to the institution's distance education programs. The institution maintains responsibility for the performance of faculty and program support staff supplied by consortia partners or outsourced to other organizations, including contractors who may not be accredited.

Principle 12. Disclosure

The institution discloses throughout its marketing and communications, accurate, truthful information about its mission, accreditation, courses and programs, services, policies, transfer credit policy, tuition and fees, use of recruitment incentives, its recruitment processes, and other factors important to prospective and current students and other stakeholders.

Principle 13. Services

The institution makes available a full array of academic and administrative student services that are appropriate to distance students' needs. The institution ensures that faculty and staff respond in a timely manner to student questions and concerns, both academic and administrative.

Principle 14. Resources

The institution provides the necessary resources to accommodate demand and to ensure distance higher education students receive a quality educational experience. Distance education courses and concomitant student and faculty services are offered through reliable, efficient, and readily available technologies. The institution has sufficient financial resources to ensure that students can complete the educational program to which they were admitted.

Principle 15. Institutional Outcomes

Consistent with its commitment to accountability, disclosure and institutional integrity, the institution regularly measures and publishes outcomes data through its participation in the Transparency by Design reporting initiative.