

A Quick Reference Guide to Accreditation

Standards, Outcomes, and Quality*

What is a standard?

Accreditation standards are statements that define and set expectations about fundamental essentials for educational quality. Institutional accreditation standards are written in terms of the institution as a whole; specialized accreditation standards are written in terms of specific programs in different disciplines and professions. Accreditation standards:

- Provide a framework for more detailed work at institutional, programmatic, and individual levels;
- Address educational issues and operational issues associated with developing educational results and with maintaining necessary academic protocols such as overall consistency in the meaning of academic degrees and credentials;
- Reflect the consensus of experts in the field and discipline and in higher education as the basis for accreditation decisions.

What are outcomes?

Outcomes are results. They may be expressed in terms such as:

- Educational achievement: development of student knowledge and skill in academic and/or professional or occupational content.
- Metric indicators: enrollment levels, graduation rates, loan repayment rates, etc.
- Procedural compliance: schedules, course sequences, rules, deadlines, etc.
- Reporting formats: charts, matrices, polls, analyses, interpretations, etc.

These four kinds of results - educational achievement, metric indicators, procedural compliance, and reporting formats - are not the same things. Although they can be related, one is not a substitute for any of the others. Knowledge of specific content is an essential part of making reliable judgments about educational results. Accreditation reviews include all four elements, but focus in-depth on student learning and achievement. Specialized accreditors focus intensively on the academic content of specific disciplines and professions based upon the standards.

What is quality?

Educational quality is linked to content in terms of individual knowledge, skills, and achievement. The educational quality of institutions or programs is judged in terms of the past, current, and projected capabilities to demonstrate that its results support the educational development of its students.

Accreditation means that institutional or program quality has been judged to be at an acceptable

or higher level by expert professionals in a specific field of content with experience in higher education. These experts judge the extent to which:

- Published accreditation standards are being met (and can continue to be met) by the institution or program;
- Elements such as curriculum, evaluation methods, faculty, resources, and admission requirements are suited to overall mission and level of program offerings and objectives;
- Students enrolling, if capable and diligent in their studies, can be expected to fulfill the knowledge and skills requirements for completion of their programs;
- Tests, juries, and other evaluation mechanisms are in place to support learning and ensure that graduation or completion requirements are met.

How are standards, outcomes, and quality related?

Accreditation standards are statements that define and set expectations about fundamental essentials for educational quality. Outcomes or results can provide evidence that the standards have been met. Quality is the level of results.

In specialized accreditation, standards, outcomes, and quality are defined and evaluated differently depending on the unique nature, content, evaluations and methods of different disciplines and professions. For example, engineering and the arts are different, even though they are connected and influence each other. Whatever the discipline, public protection is a baseline, and the development of capable new professionals is a fundamental goal.

Standards do not mean standardization; they allow for flexibility and diversity as long as the standards are met. In this way, aspirational quality, creativity, and diversity are encouraged to flourish. The historic result has been continuous growth in the overall quality of professional education from which the public benefits.

The term “fundamental essentials” or “threshold standards” does not mean “low standards”; it means absolute requirements. Expectations stated in standards are consistent with the level, nature, and complexity of task. The absolute requirements to pass elementary school life science, high school biology, college organic chemistry, or to graduate from medical school, or to obtain board approval as a neurosurgeon are all threshold standards, but they are different. So are the thresholds for qualification as a neurosurgeon or eligibility for a Ph.D. or a national or international prize in chemistry.

All standards and laws that are actually applied to people and situations state threshold expectations. If they do not, they are not requirements or standards, but aspirations or recommendations.

The higher the level of education in a field, the higher the level of professional knowledge and skill required to make valid evaluations of educational quality and student achievement.

*This briefing paper is posted on the ASPA website.