



Comparison of the Quality Matters Rubric to Accreditation Standards for Distance Learning

Ronald Legon
Executive Director, Quality Matters Program
Provost Emeritus, University of Baltimore

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Introduction

The major regional accrediting bodies, and the specialized accrediting agencies have taken increasing cognizance of distance learning during the past decade. They face circumstances in which many higher education institutions are retooling themselves and their curricula to take advantage of the Internet and integrated course management systems to reach new audiences and serve existing ones better. Additionally, a new breed of online institution is emerging as a major provider of popular degree programs in an asynchronous online format and the accrediting bodies are faced with the prospect of evaluating these non-traditional institutions.

Accreditation concerns with quality and accountability are challenged by instructional delivery methods that are critically dependent upon technological infrastructure, eliminate or drastically reduce face-to-face interaction between instructor and student, and do not respect geographic boundaries. The rapid growth of online programs has forced these organizations to address some rethink how some well-established standards can be met, and to address other issues for the first time. A good example of these early efforts is the “Distance Education Policy Statement” adopted by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools in 1997 and revised in 2003.

The concerns and principles in the SACS policy statement were echoed throughout the accreditation community. Despite the rapidity of change and the inevitable debates between advocates of technology-based distance learning and skeptics, there has been a remarkable degree of consensus regarding the fundamental components of responsible, high quality distance learning programs (see the [“CHEA Fact Sheet #2: The Role of Accreditation and Assuring Quality in Electronically Delivered Distance Learning”](#) (*pdf*))

September 2001. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) has played a major role in providing a forum and sponsoring a series of studies to foster this consensus (see the [“Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs”](#) promulgated by the regionals and CHEA in 2001).

The results of this movement are reflected in a set of standards adopted in 2001 by the eight regional accrediting bodies spanning the U.S., [“Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs.”](#) As CHEA has been able to document, these standards are also consistent with standards adopted by many of the specialized accrediting agencies (see [“Accreditation and Assuring Quality in Distance Learning”](#) (pdf) (CHEA Monograph Series 2002, Number 1) and [“Specialized Accreditation and Assuring Quality in Distance Learning,”](#) (pdf) (CHEA Monograph Series 2002, Number 2). While there may still be different views on how we need to measure achievement of these standards, the “Best Practices 2001” standards themselves are well established and can serve as a reasonable test of the relevance of the Quality Matters Rubric.

Before turning to specifics, however, a few general observations regarding differences and similarities between the accreditation standards for electronically mediated distance learning and the Quality Matters Rubric for online courses. The major similarities are that both are fundamentally peer review processes involving faculty and staff, and both are committed to continuous improvement through feedback from the review process.

The major difference between the two sets of criteria is that accreditation is concerned with the evaluation of entire programs and institutions, whereas the Quality Matters Rubric addresses individual courses, i.e., “where the rubber meets the road.” While a course may (and should) reflect institutional and program-level standards, policies, and resource commitments, it should not be regarded as a microcosm or surrogate for the institution or program as a whole. Therefore, certification that one or more courses in a program meet the QM standards may serve as a component of institutional or program accreditation, but cannot substitute for the broader reviews that the accreditation process requires.

On the other hand, electronically mediated distance education introduces new challenges for the accreditation process, and the Quality Matters Rubric is designed to address many of these issues. In the years before adoption of the CHEA standards by the regional accrediting bodies, several of the regional accreditation bodies sponsored in-depth studies of online education and the challenges it posed to institutional quality and to accreditation itself. One of these reports, sponsored by the North Central Association ([NCA Study Team Report: “The Impact of Technology in Learning and Teaching,”](#) March 2002) identified the inadequacy of widely adopted quality measures to fully evaluate the online component of an instruction’s instructional program. It is worth quoting this passage (p. 12) in full:

Measuring inputs, such as facilities, libraries, finances, governance, faculty, and students are clearly insufficient measures of institutional quality, as is an exclusive focus on student learning outcomes and measures, which often are narrowly defined according to data available and the subjective nature of the relative value of certain outcomes over others.

The Study Team was reluctant to support the idea that current assessment processes that focus on student learning outcomes are an exclusive measure of institutional quality, and of course it is widely accepted that limiting assessment to institutional inputs is even more limiting as a measure of institutional quality and achievement. As one member suggested, the accreditation process should not be about just “inputs” and/or “outcomes”. We should also be focusing on teaching and learning activities or processes as a third area for assessment and improvement, and the appropriate uses of technology are one element within this area of assessment. [Note: Inputs include elements such as staff qualifications, campus buildings, computers, and books in the library. Outcomes include elements such as the skills and values of graduates, graduation rates, and the degree to which certain populations of learners are well served or ill served. Activities include collaboration among students, the frequency of instructional practices such as lectures, seminar discussion, large student projects, detailed faculty comments on student projects, and appropriate uses of technology. Effective teaching and learning is an interrelated process dependent upon both teachers (one or more levels of inputs) and learning (one or more levels of outputs).]

This “third area” is precisely the focus of the Quality Matters Rubric, i.e., “measuring the teaching and learning activities” and “the appropriate uses of technology.” As such, it compliments existing techniques for inputs and outcomes, as enumerated in the footnote to the quoted passage, and may be used to fill the gap in the accreditation process that the North Central report identifies.

Analysis

“Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs” endorsed by CHEA and the eight regional accrediting agencies. The document begins with a statement of the essential elements of responsible higher education programs that should apply to distance learning no less than to campus-based education. These principles are listed in the table below with corresponding comments about the relevance of the Quality Matters Rubric and review process.

Best Practices Principles	Quality Matters Principles
That education is best experienced within a community of learning where competent professionals are actively and cooperatively involved with creating, providing, and improving the instructional program;	QM is a peer review process involving faculty, instructional designers and other support staff in a cooperative effort to continuously improve online instruction.
That learning is dynamic and interactive, regardless of the setting in which it occurs;	QM treats interactivity and active learning a critical component of every online course.
That instructional programs leading to degrees having integrity are organized around substantive and coherent curricula which define expected learning outcomes;	QM treats the alignment of expected learning outcomes with the contents, activities and assessments as a critical element in every online course.
That institutions accept the obligation to address student needs related to, and to provide the resources necessary for, their academic success;	QM expects every online course to address student access to the academic, technical, and student support services essential to student success.
That institutions are responsible for the education provided in their name;	Adoption of QM standards reflects institutional commitment to online instructional quality, wherever an institution has endorsed the rubric

	standards.
That institutions undertake the assessment and improvement of their quality, giving particular emphasis to student learning;	The QM standards are based on research and best practices to enhance student learning in online environments. Adoption of the QM review process is a clear demonstration of institutional or programmatic commitment to assessment and continuous improvement.
That institutions voluntarily subject themselves to peer review.	QM is essentially a peer review process involving both internal and external peers in the evaluation of courses.

This high degree of correspondence between the principles of the joint accreditation Best Practices document and the Quality Matters project is further demonstrated when one turns to the specific best practices endorsed by the accrediting bodies and compares them to specific standards in the Quality Matters Rubric. However, it is important to point out that some of the Best Practices standards are entirely institution-based and cannot be measured at the course level. Below is an analysis of the corresponding elements of the Best Practices document and the Quality Matters Rubric. In the first column, appears each of the Best Practices standards that can be measured using the Quality Matters Rubric. In the middle column, the corresponding language of the QM Rubric appears. The third column contains comments on the relationship between the Best Practices standards and the QM Rubric.

Best Practices	Quality Matters Rubric	Commentary
<p>1e. The internal organizational structure which enables the development, coordination, support, and oversight of electronically offered programs will vary from institution to institution. Ordinarily, however, this will include the capability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate the associated instructional and technical support relationships. • Provide (or draw upon) the required information technologies and related support services. • Provide training and support to participating instructors and students. • Assure compliance with copyright law. • Contract for products and outsourced services. 	The QM Rubric as a whole.	Adoption of the QM Rubric and its application to specific courses provides indirect evidence that the institution is addressing the issues or organizational structure and resources listed in 1e. Other commitments listed in 1e, such as marketing, academic oversight, and planning for future programs may not be inferred from the implementation of the QM Rubric.
<p>1h. The institution provides students with reasonable technical support for each educational technology, hardware, software, and delivery system required in a program.</p>	<p>VI.5 Instructions on how to access resources at a distance are sufficient and easy to understand.</p> <p>General Review Standard VII: Courses are effectively supported for students through fully accessible modes of delivery, resources and student support.</p> <p>VII.1 The course instructions articulate or link to a clear description of the technical support offered.</p>	The QM Rubric verifies whether the institution is providing appropriate technical support and whether the instructor is directing students to these resources appropriately.
<p>1i. The selection of technologies is based on appropriateness for the students and the curriculum. It is recognized that availability, cost, and other</p>	<p>VI.1 The tools and media support the learning objectives of the course and are integrated with texts and lesson assignments.</p>	The QM Rubric directly addresses the appropriateness, efficiency of the technology used to deliver online courses. Comments by

<p>issues are often involved, but program documentation should include specific consideration of the match between technology and program.</p>	<p>VI.3 Technologies required for this course are either provided or easily downloadable. VI.6 Course technologies take advantage of existing economies and efficiencies of delivery.</p>	<p>peer reviewers may suggest to the instructor more efficient and cost-effective solutions.</p>
<p>1j. The institution seeks to understand the legal and regulatory requirements of the jurisdictions in which it operates, e.g., requirements for service to those with disabilities, copyright law, state and national requirements for institutions offering educational programs, international restrictions such as export of sensitive information or technologies, etc.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does institutional documentation indicate an awareness of these requirements and that it has made an appropriate response to them? 	<p>IV.5 All resources and materials used in the online course are appropriately cited. VIII.1 The course acknowledges the importance of ADA requirements VIII.2 Web pages provide equivalent alternatives to auditory and visual content. VIII.3 Web pages have links that are self-describing and meaningful.</p>	<p>The QM Rubric addresses disabilities and copyright issues directly. It does not address issues of institutional jurisdiction and compliance with state and federal regulation.</p>
<p>2a. As with all curriculum development and review, the institution assures that each program of study results in collegiate level learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the degree or certificate awarded by the institution....</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are related instructional materials appropriate and readily accessible to students? 	<p>IV.2 Instructional materials are presented in a format appropriate to the online environment, and are easily accessible to and usable by the student.</p>	<p>The QM Rubric directly addresses this issue at the course level.</p>
<p>2e. The importance of appropriate interaction (synchronous or asynchronous) between instructor and students and among students is reflected in the design of the program and its courses, and in the technical facilities and services provided.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is instructor response to student assignments timely? Does it appear to be appropriately responsive? 	<p>General Review Standard V: The effective design of instructor-student interaction, meaningful student cooperation and student-content interaction is essential to student motivation, intellectual commitment and personal development. V.2 Learning activities foster instructor-student, content-student, and if appropriate to this course, student-student interaction. V.3 Clear standards are set for instructor response and availability (turn-around time for email, grade posting, etc.) V.4 The requirements for course interaction are clearly articulated. V.5 The course design prompts the instructor to be present, active, and engaged with the students. VI.2 The tools and media enhance student interactivity and guide the student to become a more active learner.</p>	<p>The general principle espoused in 2e are fundamental concerns of the QM Rubric at the course level.</p>
<p>3b. The institution provides an ongoing program of appropriate technical, design, and production support for participating faculty members.</p>	<p>The QM Rubric as a whole.</p>	<p>Institutional commitment to provide faculty with tools, training and support for the design of online courses is indicated by an</p>

		institutional or programmatic commitment to Quality Matters review and the continuous improvement philosophy that underpins it. Many institutions are now using the rubric standards as a basis for faculty training, course development and course enhancement.
<p>3c. The institution provides to those responsible for program development the orientation and training to help them become proficient in the uses of the program's technologies, including potential changes in course design and management.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What orientation and training programs are available? Are there opportunities for ongoing professional development? • Is adequate attention paid to pedagogical changes made possible and desirable when information technologies are employed? 	The QM Rubric as a whole.	See previous comment. Since institutions may and typically do include instructional support staff in their implementation of the Quality Matters Rubric, the institutional commitment to training these staff to support online instruction is indicated.
<p>3d. The institution provides to those responsible for working directly with students the orientation and training to help them become proficient in the uses of the technologies for these purposes, including strategies for effective interaction.</p>	VII.2 Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution's academic support system can assist the student in effectively using the resources provided.	The QM Rubric verifies whether the whether the instructor is directing students to these resources appropriately. However, there is no way to directly verify through the rubric that staff members are properly trained for this responsibility.
<p>4b. Informing the student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are students informed about technology requirements and required technical competence? 	I.6 Minimum technology requirements, minimum student skills, and, if applicable, prerequisite knowledge in the discipline, are clearly stated.	The Best Practices document recommends that students receive this information before enrolling. The QM Rubric can only verify that this information is provided in and through the course.
<p>4b. Informing the student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What information and/or advice do students receive about the nature of learning and the personal discipline required in an anytime/anywhere environment? 	I.2 A statement introduces the student to the course and to the structure of the student learning.	The Best Practices document recommends that students receive this information before enrolling. The QM Rubric can only verify that this information is provided in and through the course.
<p>4d. Sense of community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strategies and practices are implemented by this institution to involve distant students as part of an academic community? By their statements and actions, do administrators and participating faculty members communicate a belief that a sense of academic community is important? 	See 2e , above, for specific items measured by the QM Rubric.	Adoption of the QM Rubric at the program or institutional level is clear evidence of the intent to involve distant students in the academic community. However, the rubric cannot measure distant students' involvement in extra-curricular activities or the general life of the institution.
<p>5a. Documented assessment of student achievement is conducted in each course:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the institution review the effectiveness 	General Review Standard III: Assessment strategies use established ways to measure effective learning, assess student progress by	The QM rubric can determine whether assessment instruments are appropriately aligned with the objectives of a course, which

<p>of its distance education programs to assure alignment with institutional priorities and educational objectives?</p>	<p>reference to stated learning objectives, and are designed as essential to the learning process. Annotation on Standard III: Assessments, learning objectives, and learning activities align in a clear and direct way. The assessment formats provide a reasonable way to measure the stated learning objectives.</p>	<p>may, in turn, reflect institutional objectives. However, the rubric cannot directly measure assessment instruments against institutional priorities and objectives.</p>
<p>5a. Documented assessment: • How is student performance evaluated?</p>	<p>III.4 The types of assessments selected and the methods used for submitting assessments are appropriate for the distance learning environment. III.2 The grading policy is transparent and easy to understand. III.3 Assessment and measurement strategies provide feedback to the student.</p>	<p>The concern to provide students with clear information about how they are to be assessed and evaluated, as indicated in 5a are fundamental concerns of the assessment component of the QM Rubric at the course level.</p>
<p>5d. Overall program effectiveness is determined by such measures as: • The extent to which student learning matches intended outcomes, including for degree programs both the goals of general education and the objectives of the major.</p>	<p>III.1 The types of assessments selected measure the stated learning objectives and are consistent with course activities and resources.</p>	<p>The QM Rubric focuses on the alignment of assessment measures with course objectives, including content mastery, critical thinking skills, and core learning skills at the course level. However, it cannot directly measure correspondence with institutional or programmatic objectives.</p>
<p>5d. Overall program effectiveness • Measures of the extent to which library and learning resources are used appropriately by the program's students.</p>	<p>VII.2 Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution's academic support system can assist the student in effectively using the resources provided. Annotation on VII.2: For the purposes of review, academic support includes access to library resources, readiness assessment, testing services, tutoring, a writing center, a math center, supplemental instruction programs, and teaching assistants. VII.4 Course instructions articulate or link to tutorials and resources that answer basic questions related to research, writing, technology etc.</p>	<p>The QM Rubric verifies whether the whether the instructor is directing students to these resources appropriately. However, there is no way to directly verify through the rubric whether students are taking full advantage of these resources.</p>
<p>5d. Overall program effectiveness • Measures of student competence in fundamental skills such as communication, comprehension, and analysis.</p>	<p>II.2 The learning objectives address content mastery, critical thinking skills, and core learning skills. General Review Standard IV: Instructional materials are sufficiently comprehensive to achieve announced objectives and learning outcomes and are prepared by qualified persons competent in their fields.</p>	<p>The QM Rubric verifies that critical thinking and core learning skills, including communication, comprehension and analysis, are incorporated into course objectives, fostered through the resources and materials of the course and measured through course assessments.</p>

None of the remaining Best Practices standards are in conflict with the QM standards, but, as noted above, a number of them cannot be measured by a course evaluation process, such as the QM Rubric. There are, however, several areas where an expanded QM Rubric might address issues raised in the Best Practices standards. Below, is a table displaying these Best Practices standards and commenting on how they might be incorporated into future versions of the QM Rubric.

Best Practices	Potential for QM Rubric Expansion
<p>1h. The institution provides students with reasonable technical support for each educational technology hardware, software, and delivery system required in a program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a help desk function realistically available to students during hours when it is likely to be needed? • Is help available for all hardware, software, and delivery systems specified by the institution as required for the program? • Does the help desk involve person-to-person contact for the student? By what means, e.g., email, phone, fax? • Is there a well-designed FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) service, online and/or by phone menu or on-demand fax? 	<p>The QM Rubric currently verifies that the course directs students to technical support services, but does not identify and measure the adequacy of the components of those technical support services. The rubric could be expanded to require reviewers to drill deeper to determine the nature, availability and effectiveness of those services.</p>
<p>5b. When examinations are employed (paper, online, demonstrations of competency, etc.), they take place in circumstances that include firm student identification. The institution otherwise seeks to assure the integrity of student work.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If proctoring is used, what are the procedures for selecting proctors, establishing student identity, assuring security of test instruments, administering the examinations, and assuring secure and prompt evaluation? • If other methods are used to identify those who take the examination, how is identification firmly established? How are the conditions of the examination (security, time limits, etc.) controlled? • Does the institution have in place effective policies and procedures to assure the integrity of student work? 	<p>The Instructor Worksheet for a QM course review could be expanded to address the issues of security and confidentiality in testing.</p>
<p>5c. Documented procedures assure that security of personal information is protected in the conduct of assessments and evaluations and in the dissemination of results.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What procedures assure the security of personal information? • How is personal information protected while providing appropriate dissemination of the evaluation results? 	<p>The QM Rubric could be expanded to assess more fully the functionality of the gradebook, if any, in an online course. This issue could be addressed more broadly for widely adopted Course Management Systems, like Blackboard, WebCT, e-College, Angel, and Desire-2-Learn, but might need closer examination for institution-specific CMS's.</p>

Conclusions

The significant conclusion of this study is that the QM Rubric is fully consistent with published accreditation standards for online education. To the extent that institutional and programmatic standards are reflected in individual courses, the QM Rubric can verify adherence to these standards. Thus, the implementation of QM reviews in an institution or program can serve as a major element of the quality assurance process for online education that accreditation requires. Furthermore, institutional or programmatic endorsement of the rubric and a record of successful QM course reviews may indicate the presence of broader policies that reach beyond individual courses. This means that the QM Rubric can demonstrate an institution's (or program's) commitment to quality assurance of its online offerings and its success in achieving a well-defined standard for course design. With the further development of the Quality Matters Rubric, the opportunity exists to further strengthen its already close relationship to the principles and specific concerns of regional and professional accreditation.