



The United States Distance Learning Association

Quality Standards Certification

Overview

The United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) offers one of the only distance learning certification programs in the United States.

The goal of USDLA/Quality Standards is three-fold. First, the program **informs and protects** the growing number of educational consumers who are considering distance learning. Second, USDLA/QS offers to distance learning providers both the tools and a framework for **continuous improvement**. Third, effective self-regulation fosters a climate more conducive to **public support and continued growth**.

USDLA/QS certification is based on a melding of USDLA's best practices for distance learning with proven techniques of the quality movement. The program's structure serves to hold providers accountable while promoting improvement.

Although the U.S. accreditors, and especially the regional accrediting associations, have in recent

years included guidance for distance learning, there is a perception that their "common" approach is unevenly applied both within and between accrediting bodies.

Inherent in accreditation is peer review. Regularly fielding a team of peers that is both academically and technologically competent can be difficult.

QS delivers greater consistency because of two factors. First, e-learning programs are more thoroughly reviewed. Second, the reviews are conducted by a small cadre of specialists who are familiar with best practices across the entire spectrum of distance learning and who regularly review other such programs.

The USDLA/QS symbol certifies that a provider adheres to a recognized standard of performance and is committed to offering a first-quality distance learning program.

Structure

USDLA/QS certification is a standards-based program that recognizes excellence across a range of distance learning settings.

USDLA/QS derives its power both from its breadth and from its flexibility. A modular approach facilitates customer solutions. The 87 standards are functionally organized in these areas:

- Administration, leadership, and management
- Student affairs
- Teaching and learning
- Learning infrastructure

Format: Certification is based on Standards of Practice, a Code of Conduct, and evidence of a well-implemented continuous improvement process. [see next page]

Term: Certification is awarded for a five-year period, subject to performance and annual renewal.

Estimated completion: 60 to 120 days

Cost: Cost depends on the breadth and scope of the Quality Standards review process. Modest annual Service fee.

The USDLA/QS symbol certifies that an institution adheres to recognized standards of quality and performance, is responsive to its constituencies, and is committed to excellence in all aspects of its distance learning program.



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Summative Overview

| Area | Standard of practice | | # |
|----------|---|--|-----------|
| 1 | Institutional prerequisites | | |
| | | | |
| 2 | Administration, leadership, and management | | |
| | 2.1 | Integrity | 6 |
| | 2.2 | Structure and organization | 7 |
| | 2.3 | Academic development | 3 |
| | 2.4 | Quality management | 4 |
| | 2.5 | Financial management | 2 |
| | | | |
| 3 | Learner affairs | | |
| | 3.1 | Recruitment and admissions | 5 |
| | 3.2 | Guidance and counseling | 3 |
| | 3.3 | Orientation | 2 |
| | 3.4 | Fees and refunds | 3 |
| | 3.5 | Records and transcripts | 4 |
| | 3.6 | Grievances | 2 |
| | | | |
| 4 | Teaching and learning | | |
| | 4.1 | Curriculum | 2 |
| | 4.2 | Course structure and instruction | 13 |
| | 4.3 | Learner evaluation | 5 |
| | 4.4 | Program assessment | 5 |
| | | | |
| 5 | Infrastructure | | |
| | 5.1 | Distance learning advocacy and support | 3 |
| | 5.2 | Instructor/staff support | 4 |
| | 5.3 | Learner support | 8 |
| | 5.4 | Contractor relations | 6 |

Process

Three elements make up the USDLA/QS Program.

1. The provider does a self-inspection based on the **Standards of Practice** for distance learning. The provider attests to its compliance and that is then independently verified.
2. The provider agrees to abide by the Quality Standards **Code of Conduct**.
3. The provider is accountable to a **continuous improvement** process. Certification can be withdrawn if there is a pattern of failure.

Standards of practice

The USDLA/QS program incorporates 87 standards. Rarely do all of these apply to an institution. Thus, exemptions are granted by the review team without penalty.

Code of conduct

The provider agrees to operate consistently with the principles summarized below.

- Practice high ethical principles.
- Comply with legal and regulatory requirements of its jurisdiction.
- Confirm to generally accepted norms for its academic programs
- Communicate openly and honestly. Honor its promises and commitments.