



Procedural Manual

For Online and Blended Learning

Commission for Academic Accreditation

Ministry of Education

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1. Introduction

As new online and blended programs develop in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) would like to ensure that all aspects of these modes of delivery are addressed by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UAE when offering online or blended programs and courses. The CAA provides guidelines in this *Procedural Manual* to assist HEIs in developing their applications for Substantive Change of existing programs, or Initial Accreditation of new programs, when these applications involve online or blended mode of program or course delivery. The guidelines are designed to ensure that HEIs have adequate institutional administrative support and resources for delivering online and blended programs, and have clear measures for their continuous improvement.

2. Definitions and Thresholds

Annex 15 of the 2019 Standards for Institutional Licensure and Program Accreditation (*Standards*) outlines the requirements for applications involving online and blended learning for accreditation or renewal of accreditation, and Substantive Change. The CAA recognizes that common definitions and understanding of online and blended learning terminology vary at a time of evolving pedagogical, methodological, and technological changes in higher education. To ensure that the CAA, HEIs and External Review Team (ERT) members share the same understanding in communications, reviews, and applying the requirements of Annex 15, the CAA has formalized the online and blended learning terminology. This will assist the ERT members with greater consistency in reviewing online and blended programs. To distinguish between Face-to-Face, Blended, and Online Courses or Programs, the terminology listed below is used.

Compresence: The state of existing together concurrently, (adj. compresent, adv. compresently)¹. For purposes of this *Procedural Manual*, two or more entities (students and faculty, for example) are compresent if they are in the same room at the same time.

Face-to-Face (F2F) Courses are courses where faculty and students are compresent in one room during the course delivery. This is the traditional type of instruction in non-virtual, in-person classroom delivery. Synchronous online class sessions are not F2F learning.

Online Courses are courses where 100% of the course credit hours are delivered online (either synchronously or asynchronously), this means that all instructional sessions are delivered online.

¹ <https://www.definitions.net/definition/compresence>

Blended Courses are courses where instructional sessions are mixed between F2F and online delivery. A course is considered a blended course when some of the course's instructional sessions are delivered online (either synchronously or asynchronously) and the remaining credit hours are delivered as F2F sessions.

F2F Program is a program in which all its credit hours are delivered F2F.

Blended Program is a program in which less than 50% of its total credit hours are delivered online, and the rest is delivered F2F.

Online Program is a program in which 50% or more of its credit hours are delivered through online mode of delivery.

e-Learning is instruction that involves digital or electronic means of disseminating information or communication between students and instructor. e-Learning relies on digital or electronic modes of learning including online use of digital devices (computers, tablets, *etc.*). e-Learning can be used in F2F classrooms, and can be used for remote, distance, online learning, blended learning, or supplemental self-learning in a classroom.

Online learning: A type of e-learning designed for and delivered via the internet. Various technologies can be used to mediate the learning and instructional process. Online learning can be employed as part of a blended program, or an online program.

Synchronous: Instructional activities where both instructors and students are engaging in an online learning at the same time, with knowledge and information exchange take place in real time.

Asynchronous: Students engage in the same online learning and instructional activities, but at differing times from the instructors and other students.

Credit Hour Equivalency Metric: The measure used to calculate equivalence between online learning activities time as a replacement for F2F credit hours.

Flipped Classrooms: The teaching methodology in which traditional classroom learning experiences (lectures) involving passive knowledge acquisition is instead done "at home" as "homework" while active student learning and discussion are done in the classroom. Flipped classrooms maybe F2F, blended, or online.

3. Applications for Substantive Change or Initial Program Accreditation Involving Online or Blended Learning

Blended and Online learning is designed to reduce F2F classroom time with either increased online delivery of lectures or fully replacing F2F delivery with online delivery that embraces innovative teaching methodologies such as “flipped classrooms”, “research intensive”, “project-based learning”, adopting “adaptive learning” or any other methodology. Modification of courses that involve replacing F2F Credit Hour delivery with online or blended delivery requires a *Substantive Change* submission and notification to the CAA as these, by definition, alter the courses’ F2F sessional time that provides the basis for academic credit calculations. This also requires significant changes on how the courses are designed, delivered, and evaluated, as well as how student achievement of learning outcomes is assessed. In addition, when a course or section of a course is delivered through an online or blended approach, the course should be appropriately labeled ‘online’ or ‘blended’ in the course catalog, registration services, Learning Management System (LMS), and syllabus.

In order to shift a currently accredited F2F program to a blended or online mode of delivery, please submit a *Substantial Change* application with additional information demonstrating compliance with *Annex 15* and this *Procedural Manual*. To add a new online or blended program, submit an *Initial Program Accreditation Application*.

More specific details about what is expected in a *Substantive Change* or *Initial Program Accreditation* application for online or blended learning to demonstrate compliance with *Annex 15* is provided below.

3.1. Governance and Planning for Online and Blended Delivery of Courses and Programs

- 3.1.1. The institution develops, reviews, and updates all relevant policies, procedures, and forms with focus on promoting the best practices in online and blended learning. This should include:
- a. flexible scheduling permitted for online and blended courses;
 - b. attendance policy for blended and online courses and programs;
 - c. assessment policy;
 - d. workload and compensation policy that accounts for greater out-of-classroom preparation;
 - e. policy on faculty intellectual property rights of course material, including multimedia and other faculty-created material;

- f. student support services policies to account for students enrolled in online courses and programs;
 - g. clear data privacy rights and data protection policies for students and faculty engaged in online learning;
 - h. academic Integrity policies to include online courses and programs; and
 - i. policy on comprehensive review of online teaching and learning to ensure that the criteria for evaluation of faculty adapts to best practices for online learning;
- 3.1.2. The institution updates its credit hour allocation metrics to account for various modes of learning: blended, online, synchronous, asynchronous, etc. (also see section 3.11 below). This metric should allow sufficient flexibility to permit innovation and use of best practices in online or blended course design, ensuring that:
- a. a metric is in place to credit online components of a course for both blended and online courses; and
 - b. a metric is in place to credit online synchronous and asynchronous course delivery on an equal basis.
- 3.1.3. The institution embeds responsibility for the oversight, development, evaluation, and support of its online or blended programs within the current collegial governance systems, ensuring that:
- a. academic units maintain primary roles and responsibility for the online or blended curriculum including academic quality assurance, planning, assessment, and delivery of online courses;
 - b. those involved in curriculum approval, evaluation of faculty, and quality assurance of programs understand the best practices, policies and procedures for e-learning, online learning, and blended learning;
 - c. delivery and management of blended or online programs remain “housed” in academic units (i.e., within Academic Colleges and Departments); and
 - d. if TAs, Instructors, or adjuncts are used to deliver a course or support course delivery, they are to report to the program coordinator/department head and be based in the academic college/school/department delivering the program.
- 3.1.4. The institution demonstrates that it has both short- and long-range plans for the evaluation of performance, upgrading, and enhancement of the online or blended programs and support units included in their strategic planning cycles, ensuring that:
- a. the IT plan for the institution has short- and long-term goals for e-learning, including staffing, software, simulation labs, etc.;
 - b. the IT plans demonstrate foresight: evidence-based prediction of future technological and pedagogical systems;

- c. the IT and other support units regularly conduct surveys of the end users of the support systems, namely faculty and students;
- d. the online learning plans are done in consultation with all stakeholders at all stages;
- e. Quality Assurance reviews ‘closing the loop’ on evaluation of the online or blended learning systems, resources and delivery are based on an online and blended learning plan. The plan is reviewed annually by program leadership and is informed by direct and indirect measures of performance that result in a process of continuous improvement;
- f. the institution provides equipment and software replacement and upgrading plans and associated budget for the online and blended learning environments;
- g. feasibility studies are undertaken for all new online and blended learning programs;
- h. the institution’s budget clearly specifies the financial arrangements related to online and blended learning programs and courses, including the allocation of anticipated revenues and expenditures attributable to its online or blended learning operations;
- i. the budgeting is robust and anticipates unexpected changes and disruptions; and
- j. project-based budget planning is linked to the requirements of continuous online and blended learning program/course development, staffing, and facilities upgrades in support units as well as academic units.

3.2. Support Sites for Campuses of UAE HEIs in Other Countries (If applicable)

- 3.2.1. HEIs that make use of physical sites, such as tutorial or examination centers, in foreign countries to support the delivery of online and blended programs and courses, must obtain approval from the CAA.
- 3.2.2. Tutorial and examination centers must have appropriately qualified staff that are evaluated directly by the institution and subject to similar reviews and policies as applied to on-campus instructional staff.
- 3.2.3. An online or blended learning support site located in a foreign country is expected to comply with requirements of the relevant authorities of that host country.

3.3. Digital Learning Readiness/Resources

- 3.3.1. To support online and blended learning delivery, the institution must develop and maintain a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), consisting of a learning or course management platform, related communications tools (e.g., e-mail, videoconferences or blogs), and support resources and services (e.g., library resources), which is adequate to meet both the demands of its online and blended learning programs and courses, and of its faculty members and students involved in online or blended learning, ensuring that:

- a. the VLE includes or is based on a robust, secure, and stable LMS (e.g., Blackboard, Moodle, etc.);
 - b. the institution is confident that internet access to the LMS is available for all students;
 - c. courses do not use insecure apps outside the LMS as a main source of communication between professor↔student or student↔student (e.g., WhatsApp, WeChat);
 - d. when apps or software outside the VLE are used, then the data is stored for quality assurance purposes;
 - e. policies are in place to maintain the security and privacy of the VLE ecosystem;
 - f. all discussions, videos, tutorials, etc. are accessed via LMS where possible, particularly within a program; and
 - g. it maintains a secure “single point of access” for all course materials, information and assessments for students involved in online or blended programs, preferably via a secure LMS.
- 3.3.2. The institution ensures that faculty members teaching in online or blended courses have easy and timely access to necessary equipment, software, communications tools and internet connectivity and bandwidth. This will enable the faculty members to develop and deliver the courses they teach, and to communicate with students, ensuring that:
- a. access to necessary equipment, software, support staff (e.g., course design and multimedia support) and relevant LMS course pages are provided to faculty in sufficient timely ways for course development and easy course information uploads prior to the launch of the course;
 - b. internet access and necessary devices are provided to faculty;
 - c. developmental and multimedia software (such as Adobe, recording software, specific devices, etc.) is made available to faculty at least six months before online or blended course begins;
 - d. sufficient cloud or onsite storage is in place to operate the LMS at full capacity;
 - e. backups of course materials and objects are maintained; and
 - f. efforts are made to automate data entry (grading, attendance, migration of data (grades, attendance, and enrollment) to/from LMS to the Student Information System (SIS)
- 3.3.3. The institution provides sufficient technical support to both students and faculty to ensure the effective delivery of online and blended programs and courses such as:
- a. sufficient multimedia designers with technical skills to support the course and course content design;
 - b. IT support is sufficient (24/7 for fully online programs and courses);
 - c. sufficient course designers for the programs;
 - d. sufficient recording studios dedicated primarily to online and blended learning use;

- e. students have remote access to digital library and 24/7 access to course materials via a LMS;
- f. bandwidth on campus, including student residential areas, is sufficient to support online learning;
- g. students have access to student support services such as writing center, advising, counseling, registration, and grade appeals; and
- h. faculty have access to the recording and multimedia software and devices when needed.

3.4. Program and Course Delivery

3.4.1 The institution ensures that:

- a. online, blended and F2F versions of a program have the same Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs);
- b. online, blended and F2F versions (sections) of a course have the same Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs);
- c. F2F, Blended and Online may have differing assessment types and designs, but rigor and quality of assessment of student achievement of learning outcomes must be demonstrated;
- d. comparative analyses of grades and assessment of student achievement of learning outcomes are conducted regularly between F2F, and online or blended programs courses;
- e. assessments, both in type and overall assessment design, are adapted to online or blended learning;
- f. online and blended programs clearly demonstrate robust and purposeful program and course design;
- g. assessments clearly demonstrate direct and indirect assessment of CLOs and are mapped to the CLOs and evaluate student skills at the appropriate *QF Emirates* Level(s);
- h. assessments are innovative and make the best use of online or blended learning systems; and
- i. F2F exams (midterm and final) must be used unless virtual exams are justified and an exemption approved by the CAA.

3.4.2 Programs and courses are designed to facilitate interaction amongst students and between students and faculty, in either asynchronous or synchronous modes as appropriate, and maintain an effective and reliable online or blended learning environment to support this interaction. This includes:

- a. course designs require some interactions between faculty and students, either asynchronously or synchronously;

- b. synchronous class sessions are built to facilitate student participation rather than passive delivery of content information;
 - c. evaluations of the delivery of courses address the level of participation of students; and
 - d. students have access to contact information of instructors, department heads and all student support services in multiple places (website, LMS, syllabus).
- 3.4.3 All students enrolled in online or blended courses, regardless of their geographical location, have effective and easy access to learner support, including academic advising, library and learning support services.
- 3.4.4 The institution ensures the integrity of student work in the online or blended learning environment by limiting the possibility of fraud and academic dishonesty, including, but not limited to, residency requirements, proctored examinations, use of plagiarism detection software and employing effective means of authenticating student work and identity. This includes the following:
- a. Examination centers have rigorous measures in place to :
 - ensure the authenticity of the test taker;
 - employ up-to-date administrative measures and technological advances to prevent fraud and cheating;
 - support onsite proctoring systems;
 - ensure those responsible for the assessments are trained to ensure academic integrity and are qualified to invigilate examinations or conduct other forms of assessments; and
 - continuously train faculty and relevant support staff regarding online and blended learning academic integrity.
 - b. Institutions have:
 - authentication systems for logins, enrollment, submission or taking of online and blended assessment;
 - effective and implemented policies for academic dishonesty;
 - routine reviews, conducted by its IT staff, of IP logins for courses/exams/assessments and exams and reports on any unusual patterns of logins; and
 - continuous training of its IT staff on noting patterns of logins and assignments which are indicators of academic dishonesty.
- 3.4.5 The institution maintains appropriate class sizes (student/faculty ratios) in online and blended courses that ensure the effective participation of all students, and for interaction among students and between students and faculty. Class sizes should take account of the more numerous assessments, types of assessment, coursework and the course outcomes and assessment needed to properly assess student achievement of the CLOs.

- 3.4.6 Faculty workload metrics should account for extra out-of-class work, class sizes, types and more numerous assessments, additional data entry and communication requirements as well as the more extensive preparation workload necessitated by online and blended learning.
- 3.4.7 The institution evaluates the effectiveness of online and blended programs and courses according to its program of institutional research. This includes:
 - a. assuming responsibility for the quality of online and blended courses provided by partner HEIs or other organizations and having procedures in place for the evaluation and review of such courses;
 - b. evidence of evaluation by the department and faculty; and
 - c. evidence of feedback from both the department and faculty, and continuous improvement oversight.

3.5. Faculty

- 3.5.1 The institution ensures that full-time and part-time faculty teaching in online and blended programs meet the requirements of Standard 5 and Stipulation 5 in relation to their qualifications, training (including training and experience in online and blended delivery), and experience.
- 3.5.2 The institution ensures that a program delivered using online or blended learning has core faculty and support staff who are resident full-time employees guaranteeing that:
 - a. resident faculty are sufficient to oversee the quality assurance of the program and courses and handle daily administration of the program and courses;
 - b. the Chair/Head of the program/department is a resident faculty member;
 - c. decisions concerning online and blended curricula and program oversight involve faculty who are qualified academically to teach the subject and have both the technical skills and pedagogical understanding of best practices for online and blended learning delivery;
 - d. heads of department have received training in the administration, pedagogy and delivery of online and blended courses or have significant prior experience in online or blended programs;
 - e. members of Curriculum/Teaching & Learning Committees and supporting administrators all receive ongoing training in the evaluation and continuous improvement of online and blended learning, and have adapted their evaluation and approval policies, innovative assessment criteria and decision-making to align with best practices in online and blended learning;
 - f. responsibility for curricular development, delivery of programs and courses, evaluation, and quality assurance remains fully within academic units; and

- g. although CAA recommends that all full-time faculty teaching online or blended courses are resident faculty, but will permit part-time faculty to teach remotely under the following caveats:
 - i. If an institution intends to use remote faculty in any given semester, the institution must submit a request for approval to the CAA which includes the justification for the use of remote faculty and the remote faculty's qualifications.
 - ii. Part-time remote faculty are included when calculating the maximum of 25% of permitted part-time faculty per Stipulation 5.8.1.
- 3.5.3 The institution provides faculty with support in instructional design and development of online course materials including multimedia designers, programmers, librarians, course instructional designers, IT technical support, and others. This includes:
- a. sufficient number of qualified course designers;
 - b. sufficient number of qualified multimedia and technical staff to develop quality digital learning objects;
 - c. sufficient time and technical resources for faculty to develop quality online and blended learning courses;
 - d. sufficient and ongoing training for faculty;
 - e. adapting learning resource policies, procedures, and budget to accommodate online and blended learning models; and
 - f. providing faculty the software needed for the course and curriculum development.
- 3.5.4 The institution clearly specifies, in e-Learning, Student, and Faculty Manuals, the expectations for faculty engagement relating to online teaching and student support, ensuring that:
- a. faculty are aware of the expectations regarding student support;
 - b. Student Handbook specifies the teaching and support expectations;
 - c. syllabi clearly state the expectations for faculty availability and faculty contact information; and
 - d. the e-Learning Manual includes all items specified in *Annex 15.13* (also see section 3.10 below)
- 3.5.5 The institution provides opportunities for professional development of faculty engaged in online and blended learning. The training should be focused on advances in online and blended learning pedagogy and technology. This includes:
- a. evidence that faculty have received training well prior to the development and launch of online or blended courses and receive ongoing support and training; and
 - b. evidence that support includes all elements of course design, particularly assessment design.

3.6. Admissions to Programs

The institution ensures that:

- a. students entering blended or online programs are informed of the mode of delivery of their program and courses and are offered tutorials for learning in online and blended environments;
- b. the Student Handbook is updated to include online and blended learning sections which outline the difference between online, blended, and F2F learning, and the handbook is available online;
- c. students are informed as to the minimum requirements for hardware, software and internet connectivity for the program or course;
- d. students are informed of the code of conduct and expectations for their participation in the program's or course's online community of learners, including interacting with other students and with faculty or tutors, and the channels through which interaction takes place;
- e. students are aware of the library and other learning resources available to online learners and, as necessary, receive training in their use;
- f. students are aware of all support services relevant to online and blended learning available to them, to include tutoring, academic advising, and financial aid; and
- g. students are informed as to what portions of the program require their physical presence, if any, including F2F course meetings, tutorials or help sessions, field activities and examinations; and the date, time, location, and arrangements provided for these sessions.

3.7. Student Records

- 3.7.1 The institution documents that it has appropriate security measures to protect the integrity and confidentiality of student data and all course data and analytics within the online and blended learning platform, and of student information maintained within the comprehensive online and blended learning environment.
- 3.7.2 The institution does not sell student or faculty information or use sites or software that use student or faculty information for commercial purposes.
- 3.7.3 Expectations for student and faculty privacy (e.g., recording of online sessions, sharing or dissemination of course materials) are clearly outlined in online and blended learning, and other policies.

- 3.7.4 Policies limiting use and access of data and course sessions and materials are clearly outlined in online and blended learning policy.
- 3.7.5 Videos of students taking exams or class sessions are subject to strict access, dissemination and use policies (particularly important for female students).
- 3.7.6 Course communications are done through the secure LMS and not through insecure systems.
- 3.7.7 Assignments are submitted and feedback received through secure systems, sites and platforms which reasonably protect faculty and student privacy.

3.8. Public Information

- 3.8.1 The University Catalog, registration material, website, and recruitment advertisements must clearly list when a course, a section of a course, or a program is delivered online, blended or require students to have specific technology of their own.
- 3.8.2 Course information must be consistent across platforms and clearly indicate dates/times for any F2F assessments.
- 3.8.3 The University Catalog and student transcripts are consistent with Annex 15 requirements that all programs where 50% or more of the program credit hours are online, the program is listed as an online program and the student transcript clearly state that the program delivery mode is online.

3.9. Student Services

- 3.9.1 The institution ensures that:
 - a. student services, including career planning service, are available to students enrolled in online or blended programs and courses. These services should be adapted when necessary to students' local context; and
 - b. students enrolled in online programs and courses can access institutional publications, including the Catalog, Student Handbook, and official institutional communications from the administration.
- 3.9.2 Students enrolled in online and blended programs and courses are invited to participate, whenever possible, in campus events, student activities and student clubs or organizations.

- 3.9.3 The institution prepares students for online courses through the following:
- a. an institution offering online or blended courses should offer remedial instruction or training programs to enrolled students who lack sufficient information technology skills to succeed in the course;
 - b. providing online tutorials at minimum, F2F tutorials preferred;
 - c. all incoming students are given tutorials during orientation; and
 - d. tutorials are posted on the institution's LMS and website.

3.10. e-Learning Manual

The institution ensures the availability of an e-Learning Manual that must include the following:

- a. an organizational chart illustrating the responsibility for online and blended programs and courses, including material development, program delivery, learner support and evaluation;
- b. a statement of faculty roles and responsibilities in the development and implementation of online and blended programs and courses;
- c. information on the modes of delivery adopted by the institution for online and blended programs and courses (e.g., online or blended mode; synchronous or asynchronous interaction among learners; and media used for course delivery);
- d. procedures and processes relating to the continuous development of e-learning materials for the institution, including overall project management, instructional design, content creation, design of assessments, etc.;
- e. assessment policies relating to online and blended learning, focused on maintaining the integrity of student work in the LMS;
- f. characteristics of the LMS, including both its hardware and software components;
- g. the location of physical sites established to support delivery of online and blended programs and courses;
- h. information on the systems and procedures for security of testing and authentication of student identity; and
- i. copyright and intellectual property policies relating to online and blended learning materials developed by or for the institution. These policies should clearly:
 - provide faculty with information regarding their intellectual property rights and the copyright policies of the Institution;
 - indicate whether either party (institution or faculty) may use the developed course materials and under what conditions;

- state whether faculty may or may not post learning materials (video lectures) on social media and if so, any conditions or limits for posting or sharing course materials outside of class distribution;
- indicate branding requirements for all multimedia learning content posted online; and
- include the terms of an ancillary contract between the institution and the faculty member that protects their intellectual property rights and provide appropriate remuneration if course distribution rights are sold or a course is offered for sale outside the institution for non-enrolled students on a commercial learning platform or for other commercial purposes.

3.11. Credit Hours, Scheduling, and Duration of Course

For online and blended courses employing intensive or block sessions, ensure that scheduling, duration, and credit hour allocation comply with Annex 14 of the *Standards*. For Blended programs,

For blended learning, define how many credit hours of each course will move from F2F delivery to online delivery and explain how the scheduling (both F2F sessions and online delivery) will differ from the traditional F2F courses and how the hours are calculated with a clear credit hour metric.

For online delivery of course contact, describe how the institution calculates equivalency to the traditional Carnegie Credit hour allocation (1 lecture contact hour = 1 credit hour, 2-3 lab hours= 1 credit hour). For those using ECTS or CATS, include the online delivery in your current credit hour equivalency metric, noting the online component's contribution.

3.12. General Description of Program's Instructional Design

The institution is required to provide:

- a. detailed description of assessment design and the role that assessments play in assessing student achievement of PLOs, online assessments, other digital assessments, online or on-campus F2F assessments, and how the assessment design enhances academic integrity, and assesses student achievement of learning outcomes or fosters student learning;
- b. evidence of dedicated staff to support multimedia design and instructional design and dedicated resources such as recording studios;

- c. details regarding the delivery mode(s) employed in the program: asynchronous, synchronous, delivery of content, contact, online chat expectations, office hours with the total numbers of hours. This should include the IT systems or apps used for delivery;
- d. description and examples of the multimedia content provided to students with examples of the content. Examples include any online assessments, videos, interactive learning tool content, etc.; and
- e. evidence that faculty have sufficient time before implementation to properly design the course and develop the multimedia content and assessment design.

The CAA offers this guidance in the spirit of cooperation and in the hopes that HEIs will innovate and transition into quality online and blended learning. For any questions regarding *Applications* for online and blended learning, please contact us at CAA.Office@moe.gov.ae