



Academic
Quality Improvement
Program

The Higher Learning Commission NCA

Reaffirmation of Accreditation

Overview

In AQIP, the formal procedure culminating in Reaffirmation of Accreditation occurs every seven years. In the Reaffirmation procedure, an AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation reviews each institution's assembled, cumulative record of activity and judges whether it has documented that it meets the Higher Learning Commission's five *Criteria for Accreditation*. The Panel also recommends whether the institution should be permitted to continue its participation in AQIP.

Reaffirmation Rests Upon a Cumulative Body of Evidence

Reaffirmation in AQIP cannot be viewed as a separate, stand-alone procedure. Rather, AQIP's Reaffirmation procedure is the culmination of all of the other AQIP procedures, drawing from them and building on their results. Instead of imagining AQIP Reaffirmation as a separate box on a flowchart following a series of other boxes (Strategy Forums, Action Projects, Annual Updates, Systems Appraisals, Quality Checkups), Reaffirmation is best conceptualized as the apex of a pyramid, supported by all of these other AQIP procedures. Though it operates similarly to the review by two Accreditation Review Council *readers* of all the materials related to a comprehensive onsite evaluation visit in the PEAQ accreditation process, AQIP Reaffirmation comprises review of a much broader array of evidence about the institution gathered over a longer period.

In AQIP, institutions identify and take action to address their most crucial issues (Action Projects) with the assistance of peer review and feedback (Strategy Forums), and AQIP holds them regularly accountable for progress on these projects (Annual Update Reviews). AQIP institutions analyze themselves (following an outline of key processes identified in the AQIP Categories) and prepare a comprehensive written description of their current practices and current levels of performance (*Systems Portfolio*), keeping this up-to-date with continual revision. AQIP institutions revise their *Systems Portfolio* to incorporate the results of Action Projects completed as well as to update performance results. Once every four years, AQIP assigns a peer reviewer team to review, rigorously and formally (Systems Appraisal), an institution's current self-description in order to assure acceptable practices are being followed, and in order to provide the institution with actionable feedback on its next priorities for improvement (in a System Appraisal Feedback Report). A Quality Checkup visit to each institution examines *both* the seriousness with which an institution is working on its highest priorities *and* the evidence that it meets all accrediting requirements, focusing particularly on unsettled issues and any gaps in the evidentiary record identified by the Systems Appraisal.

Collectively, AQIP's procedures encompass the same ends as traditional PEAQ self-study processes and site visits. However there is no easy one-to-one equivalence between AQIP's array of procedures and PEAQ's self-study and on-site evaluation.

Reaffirmation of Accreditation is the step in which all of the findings and evidence from the other AQIP procedures are examined together to provide assurance that an institution complies with all accreditation requirements. While not a *de novo* review of the institution, Reaffirmation of Accreditation comprises a comprehensive examination of questions and conclusions raised by all the other AQIP procedures, one that recognizes the possibility that there may still be unsettled issues of compliance with the five *Criteria for Accreditation*. If any such issues remain

from the earlier procedures, or if any arise during the Reaffirmation procedure itself, there are defined and deliberate steps to be followed to deal with them.

At the end of AQIP's Reaffirmation process, the AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation can recommend to the Higher Learning Commission's Institutional Actions Council (IAC) any of the following:

- ★ that the institution meets the *Criteria for Accreditation* and the obligations of AQIP without issue, and that it be permitted to continue in AQIP with its accreditation reaffirmed for another seven years.
- ★ that the institution meets the *Criteria for Accreditation* and the obligations of AQIP, but that specific monitoring on a progress or improvement issue take place through the Actions Project cycle.
- ★ that the institution meets the *Criteria for Accreditation* without issue, but that it should return to PEAQ. (The standard for this decision is whether there is perceptible quality improvement documented in the institution's materials; continuing to meet the *Criteria for Accreditation* does not, alone, provide sufficient grounds for continued AQIP participation).
- ★ that the institution meets the *Criteria for Accreditation*, but that serious previously-identified concerns at the institution make it imperative for the institution to return to PEAQ and be scheduled for a comprehensive evaluation in five years or fewer. In addition, the Panel may recommend specific monitoring (reports, focused visits) to be applied in the PEAQ process.
- ★ that the institution presents such a serious issue of potential non-compliance with the *Criteria for Accreditation* that the Commission should consider taking immediate action. The Panel could recommend that the Commission schedule an immediate advisory visit to the institution to evaluate whether to move directly to provisions outlined in its policies for monitoring, sanction and withdrawal. During that visit, there would also be consideration of whether problems at the institution justify the institution's return to PEAQ.

Timetable for the Reaffirmation Process: *There are three phases in AQIP's Reaffirmation of Accreditation Process.*

Phase 1 (August – February) AQIP provides to the AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation with the collective history of the institution's interaction with AQIP and the Commission. The Panel identifies two Lead Reviewers to study this material in depth to determine whether and where this evidence demonstrates compliance with the Commission's *Criteria for Accreditation* and Core Components. It also reviews whether the institution's record of commitment to and achievement in continuous quality improvement merits its continuation in AQIP.

Phase 2 (before November 15) If the Panel finds that the evidence relating to any of the Core Components is insufficient, it may recommend that the institution provide additional information before the Panel makes its recommendation. The Panels' review forms and discussion guide the AQIP staff in helping the institution identify what additional materials the institution needs to submit in written or electronic form.

Phase 3 (November – May) When the Lead Reviewers agree on a recommendation they complete a form that will be forwarded to the IAC for action and subsequent confirmation by the Board of Trustees. The form summarizes the Panel's rationale for believing that each Criterion for Accreditation is met, and the recommendation further specifies whether the Panel believes the institution should continue in AQIP, and what additional actions or follow-up should be required or counseled by the Commission. The full AQIP Review Panel on

Reaffirmation reviews the Recommendation forms on each institution being considered. The full Panel must concur on every recommendation.

Calendar of Reaffirmation Events:

August 1: Reaffirmation panelists are assigned specific institutions and are provided access to evidence for all institutions scheduled for review.

September 1: Institutions submit Quality Highlights, updated Systems Portfolio link, and (if needed) additional evidence of compliance with the *Criteria for Accreditation*.

September 8: AQIP provides Reaffirmation panelists access to the complete body of evidence for all institutions scheduled for review.

November 15: Deadline by which AQIP will formally notify institutions if the AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation has determined either (a) that evidence demonstrating compliance with the *Criteria for Accreditation* is insufficient, or (b) that evidence demonstrating the rationale for continued participating in AQIP is insufficient. If additional materials are needed, institutions will be notified well before November 15.

February 15: Deadline for institutions who have been so requested to submit additional evidence of compliance with the *Criteria for Accreditation* or for continued participation in AQIP.

April: The last Institutional Actions Council (IAC) meeting at which recommendations for reaffirmation from the AQIP Review Panel are normally considered. Most reaffirmation actions will be forwarded for action to the IAC meetings held in December and February. In rare cases where additional evidence is essential, a recommendation may be postponed until the June IAC meeting.

• Specific procedures and materials for the Reaffirmation Process:

- 1) Each institution submits to AQIP by September 1 either:
 - a) an electronic file of its current, updated Systems Portfolio, and a 1-2 page "Quality Highlights" of
 - i) what major changes have occurred since the last Systems Appraisal, and
 - ii) where descriptions of these changes appear in the Systems Portfolio.

or
 - b) If an institution has not yet revised or updated its Systems Portfolio since the last Systems Appraisal, the institution submits a 3-4 page "Quality Highlights" describing:
 - i) what use it has made of its Systems Portfolio since the last Systems Appraisal,
 - ii) what use it has made of the feedback from the last Systems Appraisal,
 - iii) why AQIP should continue to view the institution as seriously committed to continuous improvement, and
 - iv) what other factors the AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation should weigh in making a determination about the institution's continued participation in AQIP.
- 2) If the report of the last Quality Checkup visit indicated that gaps remain in the institution's evidence that it meets the five Criteria for Accreditation, the institution prepares and submits by September 1 a report containing concise and persuasive evidence that no gaps remain.

- 3) Each institution regularly reports to the Higher Learning Commission the last five years of data for the Financial Ratio section of the Annual Data Update. (This occurred first in spring, 2007. In subsequent years, institutions will merely need to update this data record with data for the most recent year.)
 - a) The Higher Learning Commission (using a team of financial experts) studies this data for institutions being reviewed for AQIP reaffirmation no later than September 1.
 - b) The team reviewing financial data may contact the institution and ask for clarification or additional information. If so, it notifies the AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation of this fact.
 - c) The team identifies each institution being reviewed as **financially responsible** or as **not financially responsible** and reports its findings to the AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation. Normally these determinations are made no later than November 1.
 - i) If an institution has been determined to be **not financially responsible**, the AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation immediately recommends to the Institutional Actions Council that the institution be moved from participation in AQIP to participation in PEAQ, and that a comprehensive or focused visit be scheduled as soon as possible.
 - ii) If an institution has been determined to be **financially responsible** but the report from the financial review team indicates financial challenges or stresses, the AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation must incorporate these findings into its recommendations on the institution's continued participation in AQIP and on its advice and counsel to the institution.
- 4) For each institution being reviewed, the AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation is provided electronic access by September 8 to the body of evidence it requires for its considerations:
 - a) the institution's updated Systems Portfolio and Highlights Summary (see 1a & b);
 - b) if required, additional institutionally-submitted evidence of compliance with the *Criteria for Accreditation* (see 2);
 - c) the institution's Institutional History. This lists Higher Learning Commission accreditation and other official actions and the dates on which they occurred;
 - d) the last recommendation of the AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation concerning the institution, or, if the institution is completing its *first* seven years in AQIP, the section of the report of the last PEAQ Comprehensive Evaluation team identifying concerns and recommendations for the institution;
 - e) the letter from the Higher Learning Commission officially announcing its last Reaffirmation of Accreditation action concerning the institution;
 - f) a record of the title and description of every Action Project declared by the institution, with an indication of whether the project is current, retired, or abandoned; (Panelists will have access to the AQIP Action Project Directory, where they can examine in depth each Action Project's declaration, last Annual Update, and last reviewer feedback to the Annual Update.)
 - g) an electronic copy of the last Systems Appraisal Feedback Report sent to the institution; (Access to the Systems Portfolio on which this Appraisal was based is possible, but the old Systems Portfolio will not be routinely provided to the AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation .)
 - h) an electronic copy of the report of the Quality Checkup visit;

- i) the institution's current Statement of Affiliation Status, showing control, highest degree level stipulations, etc;
 - j) the institution's current Organizational Profile, showing headcount enrollment demographics, counts of degree programs and degrees awarded by levels, headcount dual enrollment (in high school), off-campus activities, and distance education certificate and degree programs.
- 5) All members of the AQIP Review Panel on Reaffirmation will have full and free access to all materials for every institution under review.
- a) Two panelists will be designated as Lead Reviewers for each institution, and one of those will be designated as Review Coordinator for an institution's review.
 - b) Panelists will have all information needed for their review by September 8, and will conduct a preliminary scan of their assigned institutions to determine whether the information they have is sufficient to reaffirm the institution's compliance with the five *Criteria for Accreditation*.
 - i) In instances where both Lead Reviewers concur that the information available is **not** sufficient to reaffirm compliance with the five *Criteria for Accreditation*, the Lead Reviewers will identify the issues or gaps in the institutional evidence, and specify what additional information the institution needs to supply to AQIP in order for the panelists to proceed. Institutions needing to submit additional evidence for Reaffirmation of Accreditation will be notified of this no later than November 15. Institutions where no additional evidence is needed for Reaffirmation of Accreditation will also be notified of this fact on November 15.
 - ii) In instances where both Lead Reviewers concur that the information available is not sufficient to continue the institution's participation in AQIP, the Lead Reviewers will identify the issues or gaps leading them to that conclusion and AQIP will share their observations with the institution. The institution may then decide whether it wishes to provide additional explanation of these issues and gaps to the Panel. Institutions wishing to submit additional evidence for continuation of their participation in AQIP will be invited to do so no later than November 15.
 - iii) In instances where both Lead Reviewers cannot concur a third Lead Reviewer will be assigned to the institution and a majority vote of Lead Reviewers will decide issues.
 - iv) To enable the Panel to schedule and complete its work on time, institutions must submit any needed additional materials as early as possible. To permit the Panel to allocate its time wisely, institutions planning to submit additional materials on or before the February 15 deadline must notify AQIP by December 1 of their planned schedule.
 - v) As soon as the Panel has reached a recommendation on both the reaffirmation of the institution's accreditation and its continued participation in AQIP, it will complete the recommendation form, which will then be reviewed by all other Panelists for a period of ten days.
 - (1) If other Panelists have editorial or stylistic advice on the recommendation as drafted, they forward these directly to the Review Coordinator for that institution, who may decide, with or without consultation with the other Lead Reviewer, to incorporate the editorial advice into the recommendation.
 - (2) If other Panelists disagree with the substance of the recommendation as drafted they forward their objections directly to the Review Coordinator for

that institution, who must share these concerns and consult with the other Lead Reviewer(s). The Lead Reviewers then redraft and re-publish their recommendation and the entire Panel reviews it again.

- (3) If no other Panelists raise issues with the recommendation as drafted it becomes official and is forwarded to the Higher Learning Commissions Institutional Actions Council.

The Panel's recommendation is sent to the institution at the same time it is forwarded to the Institutional Actions Council with enough time, if the institution wishes, for the institution to submit to Institutional Actions Council an explanation of why it disagrees with the recommendation. (If the institution agrees with the recommendation there is no need for it to communicate with or provide additional materials to the Institutional Actions Council and it will be discouraged from doing so.)