Meaning, Quality, and Integrity of Degrees FAQs

Overview & Purpose

In the 2013 Handbook of Accreditation, institutions are asked to address the Meaning, Quality, and Integrity of Degrees in component 3 of the institutional report. The purpose of these FAQs is to provide additional information to institutions regarding how to think about and address this component.

1. What is meant by the “meaning,” “quality,” and “integrity” of degrees and how can an institution demonstrate it is meeting this requirement?

CFR 2.2 indicates that the degree as a whole should be more than the sum of its traditional parts: courses, credits, and grades. Demonstrating the meaning of degrees thus involves addressing questions about what the institution expects its students – undergraduates and graduates alike – to know and be able to do upon graduation, and how graduates embody the distinct values and traditions of the institution through their dispositions and future plans. A degree that is of high quality and integrity is one in which appropriately relevant and challenging learning goals are met by students who are offered a rich and coherent educational experience that is designed, delivered, and assessed by appropriately qualified faculty and supported by other institutional personnel as needed to ensure student success in achieving those goals. An institution may want to address all of these elements in providing evidence of the meaning, quality, and integrity of its degrees.

2. Why are institutions in the region being asked to define and document the meaning, quality, and integrity of our degrees?

The value of higher education in the U.S. is being questioned today more forcefully than at any time in recent memory. Institutions and accreditors are challenged to demonstrate that it is worth the time, effort, and money necessary for students to engage in and complete postsecondary study leading to a degree. Traditionally, institutions have described their degrees either very generally (i.e., as something of self-evident value) or very concretely (in terms of specific degree requirements and preparation for specific professions). This component of the institutional report asks for something different: a holistic exploration of the middle ground between those two extremes, expressed in terms of the outcomes for students and the institutional mechanisms that support those outcomes. Defining the meaning of higher degrees can provide clarity for institutions, for students, and for a public that seeks to understand what unique educational experience will be had at that particular institution and what makes the investment in that experience worthwhile.
3. What’s the relationship between the meaning, quality, and integrity of degrees (component 3 of the institutional report) and educational quality, specifically the core competencies (component 4)?

Component 3 takes a broad, holistic view of the entire educational experience leading to a degree; component 4 is concerned with five specific higher-order intellectual skills that provide a foundation for current and future learning. For Component 3, institutions are encouraged to develop their own strategies for articulating the meaning of their degrees in ways that make sense for their mission, values, and student populations.

The response in Component 4 should convey the institution’s expectations for its graduates’ performance in these specific areas and how the institution determines whether graduates are reliably achieving those expectations. It is the institution’s responsibility to set expectations for learning outcomes that are appropriate to the institution’s mission, programs offered, student characteristics, and other criteria. The institution analyzes the evidence according to its own judgment, reports on student achievement of its learning outcomes in a way that makes sense for the institution (e.g., as a single score, or within ranges or qualitative categories), contextualizes the findings according to the mission and priorities of the institution, and formulates its own plans for improvement, if needed.

An institution’s response in component 3 provides a broad background for understanding how these specific competencies are related to the meaning of the institution’s degrees. Some institutions might find it useful to frame their response to component 3 in a way that anticipates its response to component 4. The 2013 Handbook notes that institutions may structure their reports in the way that they find best suited to telling their stories and are free to depart from the suggested order by combining or reordering the components. However, reviewers should be able to identify the parts of the report that are intended as the response to the various components.

4. Do institutions have to use the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP)? Does it improve their chances of a positive review if they do?

No and No. WSCUC does not require institutions to use the DQP or any other specific framework or resource. Rather, institutions are encouraged to develop their own strategies for articulating the meaning of their degrees in ways that make sense for their mission, values, and student populations.

5. Are institutions being asked to document that every student is meeting every expectation?

No. For good assessment practices to be sustainable, sampling is appropriate in most cases. Institutions are free to develop practices that best meet their needs.

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