

Distance Education Standards

Laura Aaron, PhD, R.T.(R)(M)(QM), FASRT

Distance education in higher learning has become increasingly common. In 2013, more than 6 million students were enrolled in at least one distance education course.¹ The increase in distance education is evident in all types of educational programs including those in the radiologic sciences. Most, if not all, radiologic sciences programs have integrated distance education into the curriculum and now use a variety of teaching strategies to provide instruction to students in face-to-face, online, and hybrid courses.

The Joint Review Committee on Education in Radiologic Technology (JRCERT) supports programs in developing and using alternative learning approaches.² To clarify its position, JRCERT defined distance education as:

an educational process characterized by the separation, in time or place, between instructor and students. Distance education/delivery courses are taught primarily (more than 50%) through the use of TV, audio, or computer transmissions (broadcast, closed-circuit, cable, microwave, satellite transmissions); audio or computer conferencing; video cassettes or disks; correspondence; and/or a combination of face-to-face instruction with a distance learning component (hybrid).²

Distance education can be categorized in multiple ways. One category is mode of delivery, which can be

synchronous or asynchronous.³ Through synchronous delivery, students attend class meetings in real time, even if they are in different locations. With asynchronous delivery, students can access materials at their own convenience. Course quality must be maintained when integrating a distance education component into any program. Standards for distance education are similar to those in a traditional educational setting.³ JRCERT uses the same standards to evaluate a program's curriculum, regardless of whether its courses are delivered traditionally or if distance education is integrated into the curriculum.

The JRCERT standards for accredited educational programs are used to ensure the quality of educational programs in radiography, radiation therapy, magnetic resonance imaging, and medical dosimetry. JRCERT identifies programs offering 4 or more radiologic science didactic courses in the professional curriculum via distance education as "distance education" programs. Programs intending to offer 4 or more professional courses that meet the definition of distance education must submit notification of a substantive change to the JRCERT. The JRCERT Board of Directors must approve the change prior to its implementation.

Distance Education Standards

Distance education programs are expected to comply with all standards just as traditional programs are. Five of the 6 JRCERT standards can be applied to the

distance education components of the program's curriculum. Standard 4 is excluded from the following list because it is not relevant to distance education.

Standard One

Standard One addresses the integrity of a program.^{4,7} Most importantly, student privacy must be protected. Programs also must have processes to verify that the students who register are the ones who complete assignments and receive credit for the course. For example, secure logins for students taking online courses can be used to help protect and authenticate student identity. In addition, programs should publish materials informing students of the use of distance education in the curriculum and the associated costs. Those publications also must state any special requirements related to distance education.²

Standard Two

Standard Two focuses on the resources available to the program.^{4,7} Programs must ensure adequate administrative support in terms of numbers of faculty, financial resources, and the availability of technical support for the distance education component of the program. Adequate student learning resources and student services must be available to support distance education. Resources and services should be consistent with those provided for students who enroll in traditional courses.²

Standard Three

Standard Three evaluates the curriculum and academic practices of the program.^{4,7} Instruction and learning experiences should be effective and enhance learning whenever distance education is used. Programs must demonstrate that outcomes are equivalent to those obtained with traditional teaching methods.² Students should receive appropriate advisement regardless of whether the program includes distance education. Faculty who teach distance education courses should receive evaluations that reflect their use of distance education methods and technology. Faculty evaluations should encompass criteria related to proficiency in distance education.

Standard Five

Standard Five concentrates on the assessment practices of the program.^{4,7} All programs, including distance

education programs, are required to evaluate student learning outcomes. Programs can conduct the required assessment in a variety of ways. For example, distance education programs might choose to compare distance education students to students in traditional classrooms in their assessment plan. Alternatively, the program can decide to integrate the assessment of distance education students with students in traditional classrooms. In either case, the goal is to confirm that the program is evaluating student learning outcomes irrespective of the method used to deliver curriculum.

Standard Six

Standard Six relates to institutional and programmatic data.^{4,7} Objective 6.3 requires program faculty to be qualified for their assignments. Faculty must have adequate training and professional development related to the technology employed and to the teaching methodology. For example, using teaching methods that are successful in a face-to-face environment might not be effective in a distance education environment.

Conclusion

The goal of every program is to provide a quality education that prepares students to become members of their chosen professions. The mode of curriculum delivery in any program does not change that goal. When implementing distance education—or any new instructional technology or teaching method—educators are required to maintain the quality of the program.

Laura Aaron, PhD, R.T.(R)(M)(QM), FASRT, is director and professor of the School of Allied Health for Northwestern State University in Shreveport, Louisiana. She also serves on the ASRT Foundation Scholarship Review Committee. Aaron was an ASRT Foundation professional research grant awardee in 2004 and 2009, and a Stern Scholarship recipient in 2003. She serves as chair of the JRCERT Board of Directors and can be reached at carwilel@nsula.edu.

References

1. Allen IE, Seaman J. Grade level: tracking online education in the United States. <http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com>

- /reports/gradelevel.pdf. Published February 2015. Accessed June 11, 2015.
2. Alternative learning options: policy statements. Joint Review Committee on Education in Radiologic Technology Web site. <http://www.jrcert.org/resources/governance/accreditation-policies/10-800/>. Revised April 2011. Accessed June 11, 2015.
 3. Slimp M. Trends in distance education—what college leaders should consider. <http://www.itcnetwork.org/attachments/article/1133/TrendsinDistanceEducationNov2014FINALWEBVERSION.pdf>. Published November 2014. Accessed June 15, 2015.
 4. Standards for an accredited educational program in radiography. Joint Review Committee on Education in Radiologic Technology Web site. http://www.jrcert.org/sites/jrcert/uploads/documents/2014_Standards/Standards_2014-Radiography.doc. Effective January 1, 2014. Accessed June 15, 2015.
 5. Standards for an accredited educational program in radiation therapy. Joint Review Committee on Education in Radiologic Technology Web site. http://www.jrcert.org/sites/jrcert/uploads/documents/2014_StandardsStandards_2014-Radiation_Therapy.doc. Effective January 1, 2014. Accessed June 15, 2015.
 6. Standards for an accredited educational program in magnetic resonance. Joint Review Committee on Education in Radiologic Technology Web site. http://www.jrcert.org/sites/jrcert/uploads/documents/2014_Standards/Standards_2014-Magnetic_Resonance.doc. Effective January 1, 2014. Accessed June 15, 2015.
 7. Standards for an accredited educational program in medical dosimetry. Joint Review Committee on Education in Radiologic Technology Web site. http://www.jrcert.org/sites/jrcert/uploads/documents/2014_Standards/Standards_2014-Medical_Dosimetry.doc. Effective January 1, 2014. Accessed June 15, 2015.