

**Paper  
for  
INQAAHE Biennial Conference 2019**

Theme

*Quality Assurance, Qualifications, and Recognition: Fostering Trust in a Globalised World*

Sub-Theme

*Sub theme 1: New technologies, innovation and quality assurance: how to consider QA and its key principles in a world of disruptive technology and constant change*

Topic

Accreditation for Online Learning Programme

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Organisation

Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications

Audio-visual Requirements

Nil

## **Accreditation for Online Learning Programme**

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### **ABSTRACT**

After a year of desktop study and pilot accreditation, the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) launched the new service of accreditation for Online Learning Programme (OLP) in April 2018. The HKCAAVQ's approach of OLP accreditation has five distinctive features: (i) eligibility requirement for OLP accreditation; (ii) one common set of accreditation standards; (iii) outcome-based approach; (iv) different learning, teaching and assessment of OLP; and (v) different evidence requirements for OLP. We will learn from the coming OLP accreditation exercises to fine-tune and adjust the accreditation process and evidence requirements as appropriate, and to grow with the sector in the age of disruptive technology and constant change.

### **KEYWORDS**

Accreditation, Blended learning, E-learning, Learning management system, Online learning, Quality assurance, Technology-enhanced

### **INTRODUCTION**

Inclusion of online components in learning has become a norm in higher education nowadays when technology advances and popularises. The online components appear in a diverse manner. It may be a virtual “storage” area to keep the teaching and references materials for student download; a video-on-demand server for keeping video records of lectures for viewing and reviewing by students; a discussion forum or platform for exchange of views, ideas, and collaborative work by students; a “venue” for assessments where quizzes and tests be held, and a window for submission of assignments; a private chat room where students can have direct dialog with the instructor, no matter human or robot. The online components may be representing only a small portion of the delivery (if it is just a virtual storage space), or the only platform where learning happens (when all the teaching and learning is conducted online). The degree of online delivery can spread across a wide spectrum depending on the components adopted.

The Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) is the only statutory accreditation authority for qualifications seeking recognition under the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF). We conduct various accreditation exercises for different purposes, such as Learning Programme Accreditation (LPA) for programmes leading to local awards, or accreditation for Non-local Learning Programme (NLP), a special type of LPA with granting bodies outside HK, for HKQF recognition. Lately, we have been approached by different local and non-local institutions and organisations, indicating intention to seek accreditation for their online learning programmes for recognition under the HKQF.

In response to the increasing need and requests, HKCAAVQ launched the new service of accreditation for Online Learning Programme (OLP) in April 2018. To prepare for the launch, we conducted a year of desktop study and a pilot accreditation exercise to identify issues as well as solutions. The findings informed the next steps, including formulating the *Submission Guide for Accreditation of Online Learning Programmes* which provides OLP-specific guidance on the evidence requirements, and supplementing the revised accreditation standards of the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process<sup>1</sup> with specific considerations for online delivery.

This paper intends to outline the features of HKCAAVQ's accreditation for OLP, which is concluded from the desktop study and the pilot accreditation exercise.

## **DEFINITION OF OLP**

In many countries or regions, online learning is categorised under “distance learning”<sup>i</sup> but carrying different names: e-learning, online learning, technology-enhanced learning, etc. Regardless the name, such learning process is distinguished by what we called “online components”. Inclusion of such components in learning is growing tremendously as technology advances and more and more online resources are available. Unless the programme is totally conducted online, the various degree of inclusion of such components will be termed as “blended” or “mixed” mode of delivery. In a blended or mixed mode of delivery, the various online components are playing different roles in a learning programme. If it is only a virtual storage area for download, it will have a minimal impact on the learning process. On the contrary, if it is the only platform for learning, the learning process and the evidence of the learning outcomes may be totally different from the traditional face-to-face delivered programmes. Therefore, to distinguish the approach of accreditation for OLP from traditional programmes, HKCAAVQ defines OLP as:

*Online delivery is defined as delivery that is enhanced by the use of technology and is delivered through a digital learning platform to provide structured teaching, learning and assessment. Learning programmes with more than 50% of instruction delivered online will be accredited with reference to the additional evidence requirements.*

The definition is not meant to define the nature of OLP, but to highlight the features expected for OLP where the online components play a significant role to impact on the programme design and delivery. Such features include:

- (a) *Structured Teaching, Learning and Assessment* – The programme should be a structured learning process. Although “personalisation”<sup>ii</sup> is considered as the leading concept in online learning, the flexibility for adjusting own pace of learning or choosing own study path should be carefully considered and directed in the programme design to ensure that the intended learning outcomes can be attained and attested when students complete the programme. Therefore, the design must be

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<sup>1</sup> The Four-stage Quality Assurance Process is the accreditation process conducted by HKCAAVQ for institutions and programmes seeking recognition under the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF). The four stages are Initial Evaluation (IE), Learning Programme Accreditation (LPA) and Re-accreditation (Re-LPA), Programme Area Accreditation (PAA), and Periodic Review (PR).

structured to guide the students to attain the intended learning outcomes, though it may be more flexible and provide more pathways to do so.

- (b) *Delivered through a Digital Learning Platform* – Interactions between students and teachers and among students are important for students to construct their understanding and meaning of the learning. In traditional face-to-face delivery, this happens in the classroom; for OLP, this is expected to happen on a digital learning platform that accommodates one-to-one or even many-to-many interactions. The virtual learning environment should facilitate the interactions similar as the physical classroom, but enhanced with functionality on multimedia exchange and connectivity to the student networks.
- (c) *Enhanced by Use of Technology* – The inclusion of online components, or adopting a digital platform for learning, should not simply be a copycat of other institutions or for cutting resources purpose. It should be an institutional strategic move in programme design and delivery, aiming to “enhance” the effectiveness of learning. The enhancement made should be properly measured and evaluated for sustainable development, and the move should be supported by adequate resources and proper training to all levels of users.
- (d) *More than 50% of Instruction Delivered Online* – It is not uncommon that technology is adopted and employed even in the traditional face-to-face delivery, just a matter of proportion. Therefore, for the online components to have a significant impact on the programme design and delivery, online delivery should be the major delivery channel, which accounts for more than 50% of the learning activities delivered. By counting the notional learning time spent on the activities, or the credits carried by different modules/courses, the percentage can be worked out to distinguish an OLP from a traditional face-to-face delivered programme for accreditation purpose.

The distinctive features outlined above informed our understanding as well as expectation on the design and operation of an OLP. Based on the understanding and expectation, HKCAAVQ laid down its approach of the OLP accreditation.

## **APPROACH OF OLP ACCREDITATION**

Concluding from the desktop study and the pilot accreditation exercise, HKCAAVQ confirmed its approach of OLP accreditation with the following features.

### **1. *Eligibility Requirement for OLP Accreditation***

OLP is a programme with a mix of delivery methods “enhanced” by technologies. Therefore, the institution offering OLP is expected to be experienced in operating learning programmes to identify appropriate technologies to “enhance” the learning.

In the local context, the institution seeking accreditation for OLP is expected to possess demonstrated competence in operating recognised programmes; therefore, the institution is required to have at least one programme successfully accredited and recognised under the HKQF. For non-local institutions, the competence should be demonstrated through a recognised status in the home country.

## **2. One Common Set of Accreditation Standards**

The desktop study showed that quality assurance organisations or agencies in a number of countries or regions such as Australia<sup>iii</sup> and some selected European countries<sup>iv</sup> adopt the same standards for accreditation of learning programmes regardless of the delivery mode.

In the review of the accreditation standards of the Four-stage Quality Assurance Process in 2015-2018, one of the research themes was the compatibility of the standards to the new forms of delivery, particularly in the context of online or blended delivery. After the review, HKCAAVQ stipulated explicitly that the accreditation standards are set to ascertain competence of an institution and standard of its programme according to the purpose of the accreditation. The accreditation standards do not restrict nor confine the design or delivery mode of the programmes. This understanding is disseminated through the revised accreditation standards<sup>v</sup> which were purposefully made neutral in terms of models and modes of delivery of the programmes. For example, for learning, teaching and assessment activities, they must be “effective in delivering the programme content and assessing the attainment of the intended learning outcomes”, rather than the employment of “a range of teaching methods” or “assessment methods and techniques”.

OLP are required to meet the same accreditation standards as programmes with face-to-face delivery, or whatever delivery modes, for recognition under the HKQF.

## **3. Outcome-based Approach**

In assessing the competence of an institution, HKCAAVQ adopts an outcome-based approach, which is to assess the different levels of outcomes and their alignment according to the purpose of the accreditation. There is a hierarchy of outcomes considered in the accreditation<sup>vi</sup>:

- (a) Learner outcomes – learning outcomes attained by a learner after successful completion of a learning programme. Learner outcomes are reflected by assessments.
- (b) Programme outcomes – performance of a learning programme in relation to its programme objectives. Programme outcomes are typically assessed by analysing information such as stakeholder’s feedback and employment data.
- (c) Organisational outcomes – performance of an institution in relation to achieving its vision and mission through effective governance and management. Internally, an institution typically develops relevant performance indicators to assess its organisational outcomes. Effectiveness is a commonly used indicator in this regard.

Accreditation does not prescribe programme design but assesses only the appropriateness and effectiveness of its design with respect to the claimed objectives and intended learning outcomes. The alignment and effectiveness of programme design should be reflected on the different levels of outcomes; hence, the outcomes are the focus of accreditation, irrespective of the delivery modes.

OLP is expected to demonstrate alignment and effectiveness of its design through the different levels of outcomes for meeting the accreditation standards.

## **4. Different Learning, Teaching and Assessment of OLP**

The key features of OLP outlined in the definition above are basically on its learning, teaching and assessment arrangement:

- (a) Structured teaching, learning and assessment
- (b) Delivered through a digital learning platform
- (c) Enhanced by use of technology
- (d) More than 50% of instruction delivered online

In OLP, majority of the instruction is conducted online through a digital learning platform, which aims at enhancing learning by the use of technology, no matter synchronous or asynchronous. Although OLP has different learning, teaching and assessment arrangement, the concerns in accreditation are the same: whether the (online) learning and teaching design and arrangement align with the claimed objectives, and are effective in facilitating students in attaining the learning outcomes; whether adequate support, academic and personal, is given to students during their learning (on the platform); whether staff is trained or properly equipped to manage the teaching and learning and assessment (on the digital platform); and whether the quality assurance mechanism is able to properly and timely monitor the student learning and the performance of the OLP.

In the pilot accreditation exercise, it was noted that support at the institutional and strategic level is crucial for the sustainable development of OLP. The adoption or migration to online learning and teaching implies an investment in the IT infrastructure which encompasses the elements of hardware, software and connectivity; and problem-solving for various issues arising from the new modes of delivery, such as accessibility to the online platform, time zone differences when the programme is to be accessible outside the homeland, technical support and timely feedback to students, etc.

The concerns in accreditation remain the same, but the issues to be explored in OLP are different due to the change of the delivery modes.

### **5. *Different Evidence Requirements for OLP***

Accreditation judgement is evidence based. All the issues explored in accreditation have to be satisfied by the evidence provided by the institution as meeting the accreditation standards. Since the issues to be explored in OLP accreditation are different from traditional face-to-face delivered programmes, a separate list of additional evidence requirements<sup>vii</sup> was prepared by HKCAAVQ for OLP accreditation. The evidence listed is not exhaustive, but aims to provide guidance to institutions in the selection and presentation of evidence to demonstrate meeting the accreditation standards, and, where applicable, prompt for the collection of the OLP-specific evidence. OLP-specific evidence may include “curriculum design and individualised contents demonstrating flexibility of allowing students to progress at their own pace”, “IT skills required for undertaking the online learning activities”, “learning management system used for online teaching and learning activities”, “estimated cost related to the maintenance and sustainability of its online programme offerings with respect to facilities and equipment for the next five years”, etc.

As majority of the instruction in OLP is happening on the digital learning platform, it is expected that the platform will be an important source of evidence to provide information on learning progress, student performance, academic advice, and feedback. Experience in the

pilot accreditation exercise showed that it is important for a learning platform to support learning analytics to inform progress of student learning for programme monitoring and student support purposes.

The OLP-specific issues should be supported by OLP-specific evidence for demonstration of meeting the accreditation standards.

## **IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS IN OLP ACCREDITATION**

From the perspective of accreditation, HKCAAVQ imposes no extra requirements on OLP, but institutions have to submit additional OLP-specific evidence to substantiate the claim of meeting the standards.

Take an example. The institution is expected have clearly defined and appropriate education objectives in order to meet the standard under the domain of Organisational Governance and Management. As an OLP institution, the development of OLP should be one of the strategic goals supported by top-down policies and procedures, and there should be clear targets and milestones for evaluation of its success. The direction of migrating learning and teaching online should not be a decision on a single programme, nor an ad hoc trial in view of the commitment and resources required. The move should be reflected in the strategic plans, relevant guidelines, associated committee structures and compositions, related key performance indicators (KPIs), etc. with OLP operation properly considered and included.

Under the domain of Learning, Teaching and Assessment, all the activities are expected be effective in delivering the programme content and assessing the attainment of the intended learning outcomes. For assessments to be effective and reliable, authentication of student identity is a crucial concern. Although there is not yet a standard protocol for the authentication of student identity in OLP, the institution should formulate proper policies and procedures to govern the online assessments and student authentication, and employ appropriate technologies, among the various up-to-date options, or means to ensure the reliability of the assessments in reflecting the learning outcomes of individual students.

For the domain of Programme Leadership and Staffing, the institution is expected have adequate programme leader(s), teaching and support staff with the qualities, competence, qualifications and experience necessary for effective programme management. In OLP, qualified teaching staff, other than being experts in their own disciplines, should be well equipped with the pedagogies for online teaching. There should be support staff for the IT infrastructure or digital learning platform for the development and management of the OLP. On top of these, the programme leader should be well versed about the strategic goal for OLP, and the technical requirements, pedagogical changes, concerns and monitoring of OLP on the digital platform. The competence and qualities of all these expertise should be reflected in the staff profiles, staffing plans, and staff development plans with OLP-specific skills and training taken into consideration.

Under the domain of Learning, Teaching and Enabling Resources/Services, the institution is expected to provide the relevant resources/services that are appropriate and sufficient. OLP is a structured learning process with majority of the activities delivered on the digital learning platform, which is also known as the Learning Management System (LMS). The LMS is an important platform for learning, teaching and assessment, and the most important enabling

resources required for OLP. To ensure the effectiveness of OLP, sufficient financial resources should be allocated for the procurement, as well as routine maintenance and upgrading of the LMS, which should be reflected in the budget plans for the coming three to five years for the sustainable development and operation of OLP.

The above are only a few examples of the OLP-specific evidence required in response to the accreditation standards. As technologies advances quickly, and there is yet a protocol for the operation of OLP in the industry, HKCAAVQ will not restrict the institutions to stick to a certain technology or platform or model for OLP, but the evidence provided must be adequately addressing the requirement of the standards.

## **WAY FORWARD**

To have a better picture about the OLP development in the local sector, in late July to early August 2018, we conducted a demand survey for the education and training sector of Hong Kong. Among the 80 responded institutions, only 8 (10%) are currently offering online programmes, but 19 (24%) of them, though currently have no online programme on offer, are considering to develop such programmes in the coming two years. The development of OLP is foreseeable to grow significantly in the coming years.

To cope with the growing sector, we have to get all prepared for the OLP accreditation. A briefing session was held in October 2018 and a workshop in January 2019. A facilitating approach is adopted to assist the institutions, especially those new to HKCAAVQ accreditation, in preparing and planning for the accreditation. Meanwhile, we collect the concerns and views from the institutions on the assistance and tools they need to inform our next actions.

Based on the information and views gathered from the demand survey and the briefing session, a collective approach for OLP accreditation exercises is adopted. Programmes of similar natures by different institutions will be accredited in one batch by a common panel for better focus and efficiency. As a start, two collective exercises are arranged according to the programme natures indicated in the demand survey: one on “Business and Management”, and the other on “Humanities and Social Sciences”. The collective exercises provide clear timelines to the interested institutions for their preparation of the accreditation; meanwhile, we can tender timely advice and guidance according to the progress of preparation of the participating institutions. The collective approach is also beneficial to HKCAAVQ. It is an efficient means of generating and sharing knowledge and experience for both internal staff and panel members, particularly on the key areas of OLP, such as authentication of students and arrangement of valid and reliable online assessments.

We continue to explore the possibilities of innovative and efficient arrangements for the OLP accreditation. For example, online meetings may be arranged for the local and non-local panel members to meet with the representatives of the local and/or non-local institutions of the OLP, instead of confining the meetings to a physical site for the “site visit”.

We will learn from the coming OLP accreditation exercises to fine-tune the accreditation process and evidence requirements, and explore for more possibilities. We are fully aware that OLP is being driven by the disruptive technology and the vibrant industry of online learning. We will keep our mind open and alert about the development of the sector.

Innovation is always our core professional value that we are to actively pursue new ideas and practices that enhance quality assurance and improvement, and the capacity of ourselves.

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