National Center on
Accessible Educational Materials

Study Guide for the AEM Quality Indicators with Critical Components for Higher Education

By the National AEM Center at CAST

Published: February 2022

IDEAs that Work
Office of Special
Education Programs

National Center on Accessible Educational Materials (2022). *Study Guide for the AEM Quality Indicators with Critical Components for Higher Education*. Wakefield, MA: National Center on Accessible Educational Materials

Contents

Purpose

The National Center on Accessible Educational Materials for Learning (National AEM Center) at CAST is a technical assistance (TA) center funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). The purpose of the Center is to improve educational and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities through TA activities that increase both the availability and the use of accessible materials and technologies. The Center's stakeholders serve and advocate for individuals with disabilities and their families across the continuum of educational settings: early learning, K–12, and postsecondary academic and career training programs.

The AEM Center's TA is guided by the [Quality Indicators for the Provision of AEM and Accessible Technologies](#). The seven Quality Indicators describe the essential elements of a system that ensures the consistent and reliable provision of high-quality and timely accessible materials and technologies for all learners who need them, including those with disabilities. While intended to be implemented by a coordinated team of representatives from within a system (i.e., state, district, higher ed institution, or workforce agency), each individual representative needs an operational understanding of the Quality Indicators. It is through a collective understanding of individual roles and responsibilities that systems change occurs. The purpose of this guide is to facilitate an individual's self-study of the AEM Quality Indicators.

Use

This guide is for any individual seeking to develop knowledge and practical skills related to the Quality Indicators with Critical Components for Higher Education. The target audience includes but is not limited to faculty, disability/accessibility services, EIT/ICT, deans, department chairs, and campus and system administrators. As a result of completing the suggested activities in this guide, you should be prepared to use some relevant best practices for providing accessible materials and technologies at your institution. This guide is also designed to prepare individuals to be active and meaningful contributors to a team that is working toward systems change at higher ed institutions.

Begin by downloading the [Quality Indicators with Critical Components for Higher Education](#). Carefully review each Quality Indicator and its Critical Components, being certain to follow hyperlinks for additional information. It is recommended that you complete a full review of all seven Quality Indicators before completing the activities

presented in this guide. The time commitment for completing this self-study is determined by the user. You may choose to methodically complete all activities or select from those listed. Some are brief reads, listens, or views for one sitting, while others involve more self-action. You may consider completing shorter activities under each Quality Indicator first, and then return to complete the more involved activities on a second pass.

Create your own space for recording what you learn during your self-study. Google Docs, Word, OneNote, or other program can be used to create separate sections for each Quality Indicator. A workbook created with Excel or Google Sheets is another option. Regardless of the format you choose, challenge yourself to make it accessible from the start by following the AEM Center's guidance on [Creating Accessible Documents](#).

If you need assistance, please contact us by email at [aem@cast.org](#).

Actions for Making Meaning of the Quality Indicators

For each of the [seven Quality Indicators](#), a set of practical actions that an individual can take is provided. These are designed to help you build vocabulary, understand concepts, make human connections, collect relevant materials, and apply practices to your context. See the Use section for guidance on these actions.

Quality Indicator 1: A Coordinated System

Prepare to be a part of your institution's cross-functional team by increasing your AEM-related background knowledge and skills:

- Increase your awareness of [what accessible means](#), including the difference between AT and AEM.
- Review the Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust (POUR) model as a guide for understanding accessibility principles and guidelines in [vetting for accessibility](#) and [creating accessible materials](#).
- Familiarize yourself with [accessible formats](#), commonly known as alternative formats in higher ed.

Identify and create a list of key personnel on your campus or in your university system with the roles listed in Critical Component 1.1. Reach out to them and ask: Do they have information and resources for improving the accessibility of educational materials and

technologies for students with disabilities? If so, let them know that you'd like to benefit from these resources. If not, explain why accessibility is so important to the retention and successful outcomes of students with disabilities at your institution. Express your interest in improving the accessibility of materials and technologies provided to students and inform them about the AEM Center's resources.

Quality Indicator 2: Timely Manner

Read the ADA language related to providing AEM in a timely manner in higher education.

Read the letter from UC Berkeley's Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate Education to the university's faculty, Reminder to Submit Textbook Adoption Information. Note that the letter points to both course material affordability *and accessibility* as instructor responsibilities. Submitting this information means that students who need textbooks and related course materials will receive them in a timely manner.

Review the AEM Center's best practices for communicating accessibility requirements in the procurement process. Procuring accessible materials from the beginning means that all students will have access at the same time.

If you're a faculty member, explore VitalSource for accessible textbooks and course materials. Selecting accessible textbooks will minimize the need for students with disabilities to acquire alternative formats, which can delay their access to the curriculum:

- Read VitalSource's accessibility commitment.
- Review the information page for the book, Leadership: Theory & Practice. Select the tab for "Accessibility" and note that the book is screen reader friendly, and images are described. Select the "View All Accessibility Metadata" to learn more about the accessibility features of the book.
- Browse VitalSource subjects to find books that are relevant to your discipline.

If you're a disability services provider, learn about sources of alternative formats for students with disabilities, which can avoid delays in student access to course materials:

- Consider joining the AccessText Network.
- Assist students with creating and using Bookshare and Learning Ally accounts.

Quality Indicator 3: Written Guidelines

Read the June 2010 Joint Dear Colleague Letter from the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department Education, which clarified that access to digital materials and technologies is a civil right for students with disabilities. In May 2011, a set of associated FAQs was published to further clarify the law.

Locate your institution's procurement policy and procedures. Review these documents for guidance and language related to communicating digital accessibility requirements.

Review the California State University (CSU) Accessible Procurement Process as an exemplar for creating system-wide procurement guidelines.

Review the AEM Center's practices for vetting for accessibility and consider how these might be incorporated in your institution's procurement process.

Visit the AEM Center's Understanding the VPAT to learn about the benefits and limitations of the Voluntary Product Accessibility Template®.

Read an EDUCAUSE article about a partnership that led to accessibility questions being included in the Higher Education Community Vendor Assessment Toolkit (HECVAT).

Quality Indicator 4: Comprehensive Learning Opportunities for Administrators, Faculty, and Other Staff

Reflect on your own role related to ensuring that all students receive accessible materials and technologies in a timely manner. What information would help you increase your knowledge and skills? What are the questions you need answered?

Make a list of your institution's current professional development priorities. How might accessibility of materials and technologies be included without adding it on as a separate initiative?

Review the AEM Center's list of recorded webinars and customize a learning series for improving AEM-related knowledge and skills of faculty in your institution. Start with Accessibility of Course Materials & Your University.

Complete the AEM Center's free Online Learning Series on Accessible Materials & Technologies. Or consider creating a training program for faculty and staff.

Use the AEM Center's report, [Higher Education and Accessible Materials and Technologies](#), as a shared reading for faculty in your department.

Refer to the Accessibility & Policy section of [CAST's UDL on Campus](#) as a resource in faculty and staff training or professional development.

Encourage a collaboration between your institutions' Disability/Accessibility Services and Student Success Centers to develop a workshop for all students to learn about apps, tools, and strategies that improve access to reading, writing, and mathematics. Include the following AEM Center resources:

- [Personalizing the Reading Experience](#)
- [Personalizing the Writing Experience](#)
- [Teaching with Accessible Math](#)

Familiarize yourself with one or more of the national organizations that offer professional resources related to accessibility in higher education:

- [Association on Higher Education And Disability (AHEAD)](#)
- [Access Technology Higher Education Network (ATHEN)](#)

Quality Indicator 5: Data Collection

Based on your role in higher ed, create and maintain a database of the digital materials and technologies students use daily in your course(s), program, or institution. This can include devices, websites, apps, ebooks, software programs, etc. For each, find and link to any available accessibility information, such as [an accessibility statement from the developer](#) or [Accessibility Conformance Report (ACR)](#). Include in your database any built-in accessibility features of each tool, as well as examples of how students are using these features. Observe and ask students about how easy or difficult it is for them to use the materials and technologies they're provided and include these notes in the database.

If you are a disability services provider, create and maintain a database for tracking both the timeliness and the quality of materials provided to students who need [accessible formats](#). Include the sources of those formats (e.g., Bookshare, Learning Ally, AccessText, local conversion, etc.). Observe and ask students how easy or difficult it is for them to use the accessible formats they're provided and include these notes in the database.

Invite students to provide feedback on the usability of course materials and technologies through a variety of means, such as video recordings and accessible forms.

Quality Indicator 6: Data Use

Look up your institution on the [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)](#). From the Institution Profile, review your institution's retention and graduation data. If your institution is seeking solutions to improve student outcomes, consider targeting the accessibility of materials and technologies for all learners.

Share data on the accessibility of digital materials and technologies provided to students with campus and system decision makers, such as deans, provosts, or other leaders. Contact publishers and developers with specific concerns. Findings from these communications can be used to improve procurement policies and practices. Suggest that this process of data collection and use be institutionalized.

Share data on the timeliness and quality of accessible formats provided to students with the relevant personnel, collaborators, and producers. The cause of any identified delays and sources of low-quality materials should be corrected. Suggest that this process of data collection and use be institutionalized.

Respond to usability feedback from students by providing training on how to use built-in accessibility features of technology and improving the use of materials with assistive technology.

Quality Indicator 7: Allocation of Resources

Create a list of the investments you believe would contribute to the building of a system for providing high-quality and timely accessible materials and technologies for all students at your institution. These can be related to personnel needs, training and professional development, data management software, technology updates, etc. Share this list with a decision maker at your institution to begin the conversation about needed resources for providing high-quality and timely accessible materials and technologies for all students.