



**NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES  
COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

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**Policy and Procedures for the  
Review of Institutions Moving to the Higher Degree Level**

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Because the accreditation of an institution extends only through the highest degree awarded at the time of its most recent evaluation by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, moving to the higher degree level is considered a substantive change. Indeed, it is one of the most fundamental changes an institution can make. Examples of moving to the higher degree include an associate's degree-granting institution beginning to offer the bachelor's degree, a bachelor's degree-granting institution beginning to offer the master's or other graduate degrees, and the master's degree-granting institution beginning to offer the doctorate. The initiation of the Ph.D. is considered a substantive change. Also, the initiation of coursework leading to a degree, certificate or credential at a level higher than the degree level at which the institution is currently accredited is considered a substantive change. In these cases, the Commission must evaluate the initiative and take positive action to extend the institution's accreditation to the higher-degree level.

The following procedures are designed to provide the means by which such evaluations take place. Through their application, the Commission works closely with the institution to facilitate its transition to the higher degree level. By this means the Commission endeavors to assure that the higher degree program(s) is developed and offered in keeping with the *Standards for Accreditation* at appropriate levels of quality and is sustained with sufficient support.

Questions about this policy and procedure should be directed to Commission's staff. Institutions planning a move to the higher degree should also consult the Commission's "Policy on Substantive Change" and its "Statement on Credits and Degrees."

**The Process**

**Advance Notice.** An accredited or candidate institution contemplating offering one or more programs at a higher degree level than its accreditation is asked to inform the Commission of its intent. Often this is done through the Annual Report Form which is sent to affiliated institutions in the late spring. However, the institution is encouraged to bring such initiatives to the Commission's attention at any time when they move from consideration to actual planning. Doing so facilitates early consultation with the Commission's staff to the end that Commission expectations and applicable policies and

procedures are clearly understood and that a timely evaluation of the institutional effort is facilitated.

**Submission of Plans.** Moving to the higher degree level represents a substantive change; institutions are referred to the Commission's "Policy on Substantive Change." Prior to offering instruction at the new degree level, the institution provides the Commission its detailed plans to do so. This report affords the opportunity to review the initiative and provide feedback prior to its implementation. As with all substantive changes, the plans should be submitted to the Commission at least six months before the institution plans to implement the proposed changes. The Commission will consider proposed moves to the higher degree only after all institutional and any necessary state approvals have been achieved.

Because moving to the higher degree level represents a fundamental institutional change, through the review of institutional plans, the Commission seeks assurance that the consequent changes in mission, faculty, student body, and resources needed for the academic program are carefully considered by the institution's board, administration, and faculty, and that there are plans in place to accomplish the changes over a period of several years. Similarly, the Commission seeks assurance that the need for and consequence of such changes have been carefully considered by the faculty, administration and governing board. Also, in reviewing institutional plans, the Commission seeks assurance that the institution has in place the appropriate means to review the changes and their implementation and use the results of those reviews for improvement.

The report should demonstrate explicitly and in detail that the institution has realistic plans in place to offer the advanced degree program(s) in keeping with the *Standards for Accreditation*. In addition, the report should address each of the Standards, as appropriate, to provide information about the actions planned and in place to assure the changes necessary for an institution offering the higher degree. A suggested outline for this report may be found at the end of this document.

The institution is encouraged to consult with Commission staff as it prepares its report.

**Preliminary Commission Review.** The Commission will review the planning document at its next scheduled meeting following its receipt, provided it is received within one month of the meeting. The purpose of this review is to effect a preliminary consideration of the initiative to apprise the institution of any concerns which, if not corrected, may preclude favorable action on accreditation. It is not a determination of its accreditation status; that can come only as a result of a site visit subsequent to the plan's implementation. Following a favorable review or upon taking any necessary corrective steps, the institution should proceed with the implementation of its plans. In disseminating information about its initiative at the higher degree level to prospective students and others, the institution should accurately describe the accreditation status of the new activity in keeping with the Commission's standard on *Public Disclosure*.

**Site Visit.** Within two years of the program(s)'s initiation, but before the first class is graduated, the Commission assesses the implementation of institutional plans through an on-site evaluation. This may be a visit focused on the new initiative alone, or part of a previously scheduled evaluation, with specific attention being given to the new activity at the higher degree level. In preparation for the site visit, the institution submits a self-study report which updates its previously considered planning document to reflect and assess actual experience. The institution is also asked to give particular attention to plans for any additional programming at the higher degree level being contemplated as well as the capacity of the institution to implement such plans.

**Commission Action.** Following its review of the institutional report and visiting team's evaluation report, utilizing its usual procedures, the Commission takes an action on the institution's request for the extension of its accreditation to the higher degree level.

Should the Commission find that the institution has not satisfactorily implemented its own plans and/or not taken the corrective steps indicated by the preliminary consideration, or if it determines that there are other impediments to offering programming at the higher degree level in keeping with the *Standards for Accreditation*, the institution will be asked to remedy expressed concerns before a positive action can be taken extending the institution's accreditation. In such cases, the Commission indicates plans for a subsequent review.

A favorable review, in addition to extending the institution's accreditation, effective retroactively to the last day of the site visit, includes as a part of the action plans for subsequent evaluations. Further monitoring may include stipulations for focused evaluations of the institution at the higher degree level and/or requirements that the institution's further development at the higher degree level be given particular emphasis in previously scheduled interim reports, which may be followed by a visit, or comprehensive self-studies. Institutions accredited at the higher degree level are required to notify the Commission of their intention to initiate other new programs at the new degree level prior to their implementation, or to substantively modify the content or the delivery of programs previously reviewed. The Commission may require that any such new programs undergo evaluation through a site visit.

### **Suggested Outline of the Plans for Moving to the Higher Degree**

While no length of the proposal is specified, generally a proposal of approximately 15-20 pages (plus attachments such as course descriptions or outlines, specific information about faculty qualifications, and documentation of state approval, as appropriate) is satisfactory. And while no format is prescribed for the report, it is useful to provide a concise description of the proposed change, followed by a discussion of how the institution has planned for the change, considering each of the Commission's Standards, as illustrated below. Upon request, Commission staff will review a draft of the report.

**Proposal Summary:** State the degree(s) the institution plans to offer, the intended student body, when the institution proposes to implement the program(s), and where and how they will be delivered. Indicate dates when the proposed changes were approved by the Board and any applicable state authority.

**1. Mission and Purposes:** How is the proposed move to the higher degree based in the institution's mission? How, if at all, will the move to the higher degree change the institution's mission?

**2. Planning and Evaluation:** How did the institution plan the proposed move? How did it determine the need or market for the proposed degree(s)? How were the board, administration, and faculty involved? As appropriate, how were external groups, such as advisory groups, involved in the planning? How will the institution evaluate the changes in the institution as a result of moving to the higher degree? (Note 2.7)

**3. Organization and Governance:** How will the higher degree be situated in the institution's organization? How will the governance system accommodate – or be changed to accommodate – the higher degree? (Note 3.8)

**4. The Academic Program:** Describe the proposed academic program(s): student learning goals, structure, curriculum and content. How will student learning be assessed at the program level? What is the schedule and plan for program review? How will the administration and faculty review and ensure the academic quality of the degree program(s) at the higher degree level? How has the institution addressed the relevant aspects of this Standard with respect to the proposed degree level and academic integrity? (Note 4.3, 4.10, 4.32, 4.44-4.50) Course outlines can be included in the appendices.

**5. Faculty:** What new faculty will be hired? How does the institution demonstrate that it has faculty qualified for the instructional and, as appropriate, the research and other scholarly aspects of the degree level proposed? How will implementation of the new program(s) affect the allocation of current faculty time? How does the institution plan to support the greater expectations for faculty scholarship associated with moving to the higher degree? (Note 5.2, 5.7, 5.19, 5.20) Faculty cv's and job descriptions for new faculty can be included in the appendices.

**6. Students:** What is the student body the institution intends to serve with the new program(s) and how will students be recruited and considered for admission? How will the significant presence of students studying for the higher degree change the culture and atmosphere of the institution? What changes are projected and planned for the services offered to the new student body? (Note 6.1-6.8)

**7. Library and Other Information Resources:** What are the institutional plans to increase the library and other information resources sufficient to support the

implementation of the higher degree? What new technology, if any, is needed and how will it be supported? (Note 7.2, 7.7, 7.8)

**8. Physical and Technology Resources:** Are new physical and/or technological resources required to support the move to the higher degree? If so, how will they be acquired and supported? (Note 8.2)

**9. Financial Resources:** What are the financial aspects of initiating and supporting the move to the higher degree (i.e., sources of revenue and categories of expenditure over a three- to five-year period)? How has the board considered the financial aspects of the planned change? (Note 9.9)

**10. Public Disclosure:** How will the program be described in official institutional print and electronic publications? How will the institution ensure that students and prospective students understand the learning goals, resources, curriculum, and other aspects of the higher degree(s)? (Note 10.1)

**11. Integrity:** How has the institution reviewed the Commission's Standard on *Integrity* and its own policies and procedures on integrity to ensure the appropriate address of any relevant issues?

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