

Do You Think Accessibility When You Select Digital Materials and Technologies? Quality Indicators Are Here for You

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Abstract

Educational materials, one of the four components of a UDL curriculum, must be accessible to students with disabilities if every learner is expected to make progress in the general curriculum. Successful provision of accessible educational materials requires comprehensive and collaborative processes for purchasing, selecting, and creating commercial, open, and educator-created materials for learning. Key factors can guide educators in setting up such a system, including compliance, timely delivery, written guidelines, professional learning opportunities, data collection, data use, and allocation of resources. This session explores the Quality Indicators for the Provision of AEM, including a tool that curriculum and procurement teams can use for continuous self-assessment and progress monitoring.

Keywords

AEM, UDL, accessibility, Quality Indicators, educational materials

INTRODUCTION

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Guidelines (CAST, 2018) call for a comprehensive approach to curriculum development, including the consideration of four discrete yet strategically interconnected components: goals, assessments, methods, and materials. Consideration of learner variability across each of these areas is offered through the UDL principles, guidelines, and checkpoints. Ensuring that educational materials are usable by learners with disabilities in a timely manner necessitates additional guidance related to accessibility considerations and standards. While procurement processes used by education agencies typically include a range of criteria such as curriculum goals and alignment with content and instructional standards, accessibility is commonly absent. To address this gap, the Quality Indicators with Critical Components for the Provision of Accessible Educational Materials and Technologies were developed by the National Center on Accessible Educational Materials (AEM Center) at CAST to guide K-12 and higher education agencies in planning, implementing, and evaluating dynamic, coordinated systems for the timely provision of AEM.

BACKGROUND

Education agencies and institutions across K-12 and higher education are legally obligated to provide accessible educational materials and accessible technologies (AEM) to learners who need them. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guides the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in K-12, which include materials in accessible formats (Carl et al., 2018). In higher education, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires institutions to provide students with disabilities with accommodations that are necessary for equal opportunity in the institution's programs, including accessible educational materials and technologies (Silberman, 2018). The responsibilities on agencies across elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels are complicated by the fact that publishers and ed tech developers are not legally required to provide educational agencies with accessible products; the obligation of equal access falls on the agencies. Beyond legal obligation, students with disabilities are entitled to AEM to access the same opportunity for independence, participation, and progress as students without disabilities (Curry et al., 2018). To proactively respond to learner variability, specifically diverse physical, sensory, and cognitive access needs, education agencies and institutions should develop policies and procedures that ensure the provision of AEM in a timely manner for all learners who need them.

AEM and UDL: Complementary Supports for All Learners

Implementing and sustaining a coordinated system of AEM-related services aligned to the Quality Indicators requires time and effort. The result, however, provides a high return on investment since accessible materials and technologies are assets to all learners. Accessibility improves product responsiveness to all user's needs and preferences by providing multiple options for access and engagement. Accessibility features promote choices for how learners see, hear, comprehend, and interact with materials and technologies, thereby interconnecting with instructional methods designed to address learner variability. This connection is best described by Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Referenced in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 and the Every

Student Succeeds Act of 2015, UDL is fundamentally represented in the Quality Indicators and their Critical Components.

QUALITY INDICATORS FOR THE PROVISION OF AEM

The Seven Quality Indicators

The Quality Indicators, which are brief statements that point to exemplifying conditions and services for high-quality AEM implementation, are designed to assist with the implementation of statutory requirements. The seven Quality Indicators work together as a system, with each contributing to the system in unique and important ways. No Quality Indicator is intended to stand on its own.

1. The agency has a coordinated system for the provision of appropriate, high-quality accessible materials and technologies for all learners with disabilities who require them.
2. The agency supports the acquisition and provision of appropriate accessible materials and technologies in a timely manner.
3. The agency develops and implements written guidelines related to effective and efficient acquisition, provision, and use of accessible materials and technologies.
4. The agency provides or arranges for comprehensive learning opportunities and technical assistance that address all aspects of the need, selection, acquisition and use of accessible materials and technologies.
5. The agency develops and implements a systematic data collection process to monitor and evaluate the equitable, timely provision of appropriate, high-quality accessible materials and technologies.
6. The agency uses the data collected to guide changes that support continuous improvement in all aspects of the systemic provision and use of accessible materials and technologies.
7. The agency allocates resources sufficient to ensure the delivery and sustainability of quality services to learners with disabilities who need accessible materials and technologies.

Intent statements for each Quality Indicator, as well as their Critical Components, are available on the AEM Center website (<http://aem.cast.org/policies/quality-indicators-provision-aem.html>).



Figure 1. The AEM Quality Indicators Logo. Reprinted from the National Center on Accessible Educational Materials (2019, March 17). The AEM Quality Indicators Logo. Retrieved from <http://aem.cast.org/policies/quality-indicators-provision-aem.html#.XJEY-MIKUk>

Purpose and Use

The purpose of the Quality Indicators and Critical Components is to assist state and local education agencies and institutions of higher education with planning, implementing, and evaluating dynamic, coordinated systems for the timely provision of AEM and accessible technologies. Given the variability of policies and practices across these organizations, the Quality Indicators and Critical Components are designed to provide consistent goals and to promote discussion around multiple methods to achieve those goals. Critical Components organize each Quality Indicator into its constituent parts and have been developed to provide actionable steps that can be used to evaluate, improve or transform existing systems. These were determined by identifying best practices for implementing every aspect of the provision of accessible materials and technologies.

The Quality Indicators and Critical Components are intended to be used across agencies in all stakeholder groups and by a wide range of personnel, individuals, and families. For example, at a systems level, leaders may use the Quality Indicators and Critical Components to update and improve policies for procuring accessible materials and technologies for system-wide use. At smaller scales, they may be used to develop guidance for selecting and creating accessible materials for curricular and programmatic use. Personnel at all levels may find them useful for determining and requesting sufficient resources for implementing accessible materials and technologies in varied settings, including classrooms, home, and the workplace. Users of the Quality Indicators may want to build background knowledge on any aspect of accessible educational materials and technologies by exploring the AEM Center website or contacting AEM Center staff for assistance at aem@cast.org.

Self-Assessment and Progress Monitoring

The AEM Center has developed a tool that agencies can adapt for their own self-assessment and progress monitoring use (see Appendix). The intent is for a collaborative team, made up of a broad and vertical representation of the agency (e.g., state, district, school, university), to conduct both independent and group studies of the Quality Indicators followed by a baseline self-assessment of their system's provision of accessible materials. The team commits to progress monitoring by establishing a cycle of updating the self-assessment (e.g., quarterly or bi-annually). A web-based interactive version of this tool for K-12 districts will be released Summer 2019.

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APPENDIX 1

- National Center on Accessible Educational Materials (2018). Quality Indicators with Critical Components for the Provision of Accessible Educational Materials and Technologies: A Self-Assessment and Periodic Monitoring Tool for K-12 and Higher Education Procurement and Related Personnel.