National Center on
Accessible Educational Materials

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

By National AEM Center at CAST

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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 technology. 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, reliable, and timely provision of high-quality accessible materials and technology 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 both individual and collective understanding 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 technology 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 study of the Quality Indicators is determined by the user. You may choose to methodically complete all activities or select based on your needs and priorities. 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.

This study guide is designed in the format of a workbook with activities and templates. There are two parts: (1) This PDF document that describes activities for each AEM Quality Indicator and (2) An editable Activity Templates document. In addition to the supports provided with the guide, we encourage you and/or your team to consider options for recording what you learn during your study of the Quality Indicators. 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 with using this study guide, please contact us by email at aem@cast.org.

Activities for Making Meaning of the Quality Indicators

For each of the seven Quality Indicators, a set of guiding questions, learning resources, and practical actions that individuals and teams can take is provided. These are designed to help you build vocabulary, understand concepts, make human connections, collect relevant information, and apply practices to your context. Download the document with the Activity Templates that are referenced throughout the guide.

Quality Indicator 1: A Coordinated System

The **institution has a coordinated system** for providing high-quality accessible materials and technologies for all students with disabilities who need them.

Activity 1.1. Does your institution have an accessibility leadership team? Refer to the University of Montana's Digital Accessibility Committee for an example. Note the range of roles and responsibilities. Another example is Austin Peay State University's Accessible University Advisory Committee. And Wake Forest's Technology Accessibility Committee includes a comprehensive charter.

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 technology 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 technology provided to students and inform them about the AEM Center' resources. The **Activity 1.1 template** provides a sample organizer and email language ready to be edited.

Activity 1.2. Increase your knowledge of what the term "accessible" means by reviewing the [AEM-related definitions on the AEM Center website](). Watch the [AEM Center video, Introduction to Accessibility](). Consider the relationship between AEM and assistive technology (AT). The **Activity 1.2 template** provides a sample exercise for applying AEM-related definitions.

Activity 1.3. Review the POUR model as a guide for understanding accessibility principles and guidelines in [Vetting for Accessibility on the AEM Center website](). The **Activity 1.3 template** provides a sample exercise for applying the four POUR principles.

Activity 1.4. Invite colleagues at your institution to join you in reading the [EDUCAUSE article, Building a Culture of Accessibility in Higher Education](). Assign to each participant one of the five "trailblazer" universities to review and provide a summary. What can your institution learn from others that have built a culture of accessibility? (Note: [The website of the Accessible Technology Initiative of the California State University]() has moved.) The **Activity 1.4 template** provides a sample organizer.

Activity 1.5. Once your institution has an accessibility leadership team established, you'll want to communicate the vision and goals for accessibility across your university system, campus, and/or online program. Refer to [California State University's Accessible Technology Initiative Memo]() for an example of communicating a systemwide vision, goals, and a plan for implementation.

Activity 1.6. Building a coordinated system for consistently providing accessible materials and technology requires clarity in roles and responsibilities across the institution. [Teach Access offers an Accessibility Skills Hiring Toolkit]() and the [Access Technology Higher Education Network (ATHEN) provides sample job descriptions]() for technology-specific positions. Gather and review some of your institution's job descriptions. How can they more effectively communicate accessibility responsibilities?

How might the job descriptions of the positions represented on your institution's accessibility leadership team be improved?

Quality Indicator 2: Timely Manner

The institution provides **high-quality accessible materials and technologies in a timely manner**.

Activity 2.1. 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. Find out if your institution has an "affordability deadline." Communicate with the same contacts in Activity 1.1 about the importance of this deadline for increasing both the affordability and the accessibility of course materials for students.

Activity 2.2. Examine your institution's library databases using the [POUR principles introduced in Activity 1.3](#). Ask your librarians if there are systems in place to address the accessibility of these texts and documents to ensure timely provision for students with disabilities. If none, consider a collaboration with the library to review current practices and identify improvements to the current system.

Activity 2.3. If you're a faculty member, explore [VitalSource](#) as a source of textbooks and course materials. 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 and explore the accessibility information about those titles.

Activity 2.4. If you're a disability services provider, consider joining the [AccessText Network](#) and assisting students with creating and using [Bookshare](#) and [Learning Ally](#) accounts. Explore the [Louis Plus Database](#).

Quality Indicator 3: Written Guidelines

The institution **develops and implements written guidelines** on the provision and use of high-quality accessible materials and technologies and **disseminates them to all responsible parties**.

Activity 3.1. Read an [EDUCAUSE article](#) about a partnership that led to accessibility questions being included in the [Higher Education Community Vendor Assessment Toolkit (HECVAT)](#).

Activity 3.2. Review the AEM Center's resources, [Communicating Digital Accessibility Requirements](#) and [Providing Accessibility Guidance to Vendors](#). Gather your institution's procurement policies and procedures. The **Activity 3.2 template** provides a sample activity for comparing your institution's procurement guidelines to the practices recommended by the AEM Center.

Activity 3.3. Learn about the benefits and limitations of the Voluntary Product Accessibility Template/Accessibility Conformance Report (VPAT®)/ACR) by reviewing the AEM Center's resource, [Understanding the VPAT](#)®. Select a digital material or other technology used at your institution and conduct an online search for its VPAT®/ACR or request it from the vendor. Many vendors make their VPAT®s/ACRs publicly available on their website. In collaboration with one or more colleagues identified in Activity 1.1, carefully review the selected product's VPAT®/ACR. Create a list of observations and questions. Share these in an email to the vendor to open a conversation about improving accessibility for the students at your institution. If your institution has a contract with the vendor, use your findings from the VPAT®/ACR in continuing contract negotiations.

Activity 3.4. Review the following procurement policies and guidelines for relevance to your own institution. The **Activity 3.4 template** provides a note-taking guide.

- [California State University's Accessibility of Public Solicitations and Acquisition of EIT Goods and Services](#) and [California State University Procurement Process Overview](#)
- [Penn State's Purchasing Terms & Conditions](#) (see Sections 16 and 17, including references to a Supplier Accessibility Statement and Accessibility Roadmap)
- [Yale University's Procedures for Working with Vendors](#)
- [Virginia Tech Standards and Guidelines](#)

Activity 3.5. Review the following digital accessibility policies for relevance to your own institution. The **Activity 3.5 template** provides a note-taking guide.

- [Georgia Tech IT Accessibility Policy](#)
- [The Ohio State University Digital Accessibility Policy](#)

Activity 3.6. For students who require accessible formats of instructional materials, also known as "alternative formats" in higher ed, clear guidelines and procedures for

requesting accommodations are essential. Read AHEAD's conceptual framework, [Supporting Accommodation Requests: Guidance on Documentation Practices](). For an example of implementing this guidance, visit the website of [Texas A&M University's Department of Disability Resources](). In particular, review [TAMU's procedure for requesting alternative format materials using the university's Accessible Information Management (AIM) Portal]().

Quality Indicator 4: Learning Opportunities for Faculty and Staff

The institution provides or arranges for **comprehensive learning opportunities and technical assistance** (TA) that address all areas of the provision and use of high-quality accessible materials and technologies.

Activity 4.1. Make a list of your institution's current professional development priorities and initiatives. How is accessibility of educational materials and technology directly relevant to those? Consider embedding accessibility in existing and future professional development to build capacity across your institution. The **Activity 4.1 template** provides a sample exercise.

Activity 4.2. Organize a shared listening at your institution using the AEM Center's podcast, *The Accessible Learning Experience*. A recommended episode is [Digital Accessibility at Virginia Tech]() featuring an interview with Mark Nichols, Senior Director of Universal Design and Accessible Technologies. Mark discusses Virginia Tech's Keep C.A.L.M. campaigns, which stands for Choose Accessible Learning Materials. Note that you can listen on the podcast app of your choice. From the AEM Center's website, you can download a transcript or use the interactive transcript in our own podcast player.

Activity 4.3. After learning about digital accessibility at Virginia Tech in Activity 4.2, visit the [Choose Accessible Learning Materials (C.A.L.M.) website](). Learn to Keep C.A.L.M. by choosing from one of the university's campaigns: Caption On, Check Contrast, Describe Images, Simplify Slides, Use Ally, and Use Meaningful Links. How does the content relate to improving the accessibility of your own institution's digital materials? How might you use or adapt the C.A.L.M. campaigns for training faculty and staff in your system, campus, or online program?

Activity 4.4. Organize a shared reading at your institution using the [AEM Center's report on the development of the current version of the Quality Indicators with Critical Components for Higher Ed](). This publication explains the rationale behind the need for Quality Indicators for providing accessible materials and technology, research on the experiences of higher ed students with disabilities, and findings from interviews with leaders in higher ed accessibility.

Activity 4.5. Professional development can be asynchronous, efficient, and impactful. For example, see Wake Forest's #NoMouse Challenge 2023, which is a simple activity for raising awareness of web accessibility at your institution. Wake Forest's Accessible Content Working Group created a campaign and incentivized faculty and staff with a prize and a digital badge. How might this activity be replicated at your institution?

Activity 4.6. Consider joining a community of other higher ed professionals who are working toward continuous digital accessibility improvement on their campuses and in their programs. Even better, invite others at your institution to join you. You'll learn together, broaden your networks, and apply new knowledge and skills. Here are some suggestions for getting started:

- EDUCAUSE Connect: IT Accessibility Community Group
- Some states host their own higher ed digital accessibility communities, such as the North Carolina Higher Ed Digital Accessibility Collaborative and the Virginia Higher Education Accessibility Partners (VHEAP). If you're unaware of such a community in your state, join EDUCAUSE's IT Accessibility Community Group and inquire.
- Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) Communities
- Access Technology Higher Education Network (ATHEN)
- Visit the AEM Café on the first Thursday of every month, September - June. Hosted by the AEM Center, the AEM Café offers a relaxed atmosphere of sharing and learning on topics generated by a diverse community of professionals.

Quality Indicator 5: Collect Data

The institution develops and implements a **secure, systematic data collection process** to monitor and evaluate the equitable, timely provision and use of high-quality accessible materials and technologies.

Activity 5.1. Conduct an inventory of the existing digital materials and technology used at your university. 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 (see CAST's exemplar) or a VPAT®/ACR. If no information is available online, submit a request through the company's "Contact Us" form or other available method. The **Activity 5.1 template** provides a sample format for data collection and suggested language when contacting companies for product accessibility information.

Activity 5.2. For disability services providers, create a system for tracking both the quality of accessible formats of course materials and timeliness of material provision for students with accommodations. Include the sources of those formats (e.g., Bookshare, Learning Ally, AccessText, local conversion, etc.). The **Activity 5.2 template** provides a table for organizing information.

Activity 5.3. Collect data from students on the accessibility and usability of materials and technology provided for their courses. The **Activity 5.3 template** provides sample questions.

Quality Indicator 6: Use Data

The institution **securely uses data to guide changes that support continuous improvement** in all areas of the systemic provision and use of high-quality accessible materials and technologies.

Activity 6.1. Share data on the accessibility of digital materials and technology provided to students (Activity 5.1) 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. The **Activity 6.1 template** provides sample language when sharing the data.

Activity 6.2. Share your data on the timeliness and quality of accessible formats provided to students (Activity 5.2) with campus and system decision makers, such as deans, provosts, or other leaders. Discuss the data and deliberate the possible causes of any delays and any instances of low-quality materials. Identify corrective actions. The **Activity 6.2 template** provides sample language when sharing the data.

Activity 6.3. Share student feedback on the usability and accessibility of course materials and technology (Activity 5.3) with campus and system decision makers, such as deans, provosts, or other leaders. Suggest the formation of a committee to systematically review the data and address any barriers students are experiencing.

Activity 6.4. 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 technology for all learners.

Quality Indicator 7: Allocate Resources

The institution **allocates resources** sufficient to ensure the delivery and sustainability of quality services to students with disabilities who need high-quality accessible materials and technologies.

Activity 7. Develop a list of top investments needed to start or expand student access to high-quality and timely accessible materials and technology. A sample list has been provided below to highlight the range of resources for consideration. The **Activity 7 template** provides a sample organizer.

- Funding to develop marketing materials and resources to build awareness of accessible materials used across the institution and the universal benefit to all students.
- Funding for faculty professional development and learning related to accessibility and and how to build capacity (short-term and long-term).
- Investment in grant opportunities involving interested faculty for professional development, technology, or other resources to assist in developing a program of support.
- Investment in faculty and staff time for participating in communities of practice, such as those highlighted in Activity 4.6.

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