Developing Essential Skills and Abilities Requirements for Programs Subject to External Accreditation

Introduction

The University of Manitoba is required to make reasonable efforts to accommodate a student with a disability when the disability does not impair the student's ability to fulfill the essential requirements of a course or program. One of the recommendations of the *ad hoc Committee of Senate Executive to Examine Accommodation of Students with Disabilities and Governance Procedures Related to Academic Requirements* (the “Cooper Commission”) was “that where academic programs are subject to external accreditation or approval, a document outlining essential skills and abilities be developed and submitted for approval by Senate; the content of this document should be congruent with the requirements outlined by the respective registering college or approval body (e.g. College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba; College of Physicians and Surgeons of Manitoba).”¹

Senate, at its April 2012 meeting, approved the Report of the Cooper Commission in principle and referred the Report back to Senate Executive to oversee the development of a detailed plan to implement the recommendations contained within the Report. The purpose of this document is to outline the steps to be followed in developing essential skills and abilities requirements for academic programs that are subject to external accreditation.

The phrase “subject to external accreditation” is being interpreted and applied as follows for the purposes of this exercise. If a regulatory body accredits your program and that body has its own essential skills and abilities document or expects that you will have one, you are required to develop an essential skills and abilities document for submission to Senate for approval. All other externally accredited programs shall choose to develop either an essential skills document or a *bona fide* academic requirements document. The steps to be followed in developing bona fide academic requirements for programs will be contained in the document entitled “Developing *Bona Fide* Academic Requirements for Programs not Subject to External Accreditation.” It is anticipated that the latter document will be presented to Senate for approval by March 2014.

There are four steps in the development of essential skills and abilities requirements for programs that are subject to external accreditation.

1. Develop skills and abilities criteria
2. Discuss and analyze skills and abilities criteria
3. Follow any Faculty-specific procedures for the review of essential skills and abilities requirements
4. Submit the essential skills and abilities requirements to the University Secretary's office for review by the appropriate Senate committees and Senate

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¹ This is recommendation (b) based on Observation 4c in the Cooper Commission report.
Definitions

Unit: Unit means the academic unit that has immediate and primary responsibility for the administration of courses and programs. This will normally be a department or equivalent unit in a departmentalized Faculty and the Faculty in a non-departmentalized Faculty.

Undergraduate Programs: In the case of undergraduate degrees that do not have sub-specializations, programs are defined as the degree-level credential (Doctor of Dental Medicine, for example). In the case of undergraduate degrees that have sub-specializations, such as Engineering, programs are defined as each of the specific sub-specializations in a degree (Civil Engineering, for example). Other undergraduate programs include diploma programs such as the School of Dental Hygiene's Diploma in Dental Hygiene.

Graduate programs: Graduate programs are defined as post-baccalaureate degree, diploma, certificate, and other credentials in specific disciplinary or interdisciplinary subject areas. For example, the Faculty of Medicine will have to develop essential skills and abilities requirements for its Post-Graduate Medical Education program.

Developing Essential Skills and Abilities Criteria

Skills and abilities criteria describe what learners may be expected to do during the program. This includes cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills and abilities.

Reasons for Skills and Abilities Criteria

- To provide students with the means to organize their efforts toward accomplishing the desired behaviours.
- To provide information to prospective students so they can make an informed choice regarding applying to a program
- To provide prospective and current students information to help them decide if they should register with Student Accessibility Services
- To help students, Student Accessibility Advisors and Faculty develop reasonable accommodation
- To protect the public

Components of essential skills and ability criteria

Resources for developing essential skills and abilities criteria include essential skills lists from the regulatory body with which program graduates register. Educators should also consider end-of-program objectives. It may be helpful to gather the skills and abilities under broad categories.

Using the ABCD model can be useful in writing clear criteria.

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2 Adapted from San Diego University's Understanding Objectives at [http://edweb.sdsu.edu/courses/EDTEC540/objectives/ObjectivesHome](http://edweb.sdsu.edu/courses/EDTEC540/objectives/ObjectivesHome).
Model - The ABCD's of Learning Objectives includes four characteristics that help an objective communicate intent:

**Audience**  
Who will be doing the behaviour?

**Behavior**  
What should the learner be able to do?

**Condition**  
Under what conditions do you want the learner to be able to do it?

**Degree**  
How well must it be done?

**Audience**  
Identify the learner (not the instructor).

**Behaviour (Performance)**  
What the learner will be able to do - it must be something that can be measured.

**Condition**  
The conditions under which the learners must demonstrate their mastery of the objective:  
What will the learners be allowed to use? What won't the learners be allowed to use?

**Degree (or criterion)**  
How well the behaviour must be done: Common degrees include: Speed, Accuracy, Quality

To create an essential skill and ability criteria, start with an action verb, followed by a statement specifying what is to be demonstrated, and finally a statement to give it context and to identify a standard for acceptable performance.

Be specific and unambiguous. Terms such as know, understand, learn, appreciate, and “to be aware of” should be avoided. The specific level of achievement should be clearly identified.

Focus on observable student performance that is capable of being assessed. It is often helpful to add the preposition “by” or “through” followed by a statement which clearly states how the learning objectives will be assessed.

**Action Verbs**  
Action verbs help to align objectives to an observable behaviour. The following resource provides a good list of action verbs that are effective.

Education Oasis, *Action Verbs for Lesson Objectives*  
Examples of Essential Skills and Abilities Criteria using the ABCD Model

Cognition
A student must demonstrate higher level cognitive abilities necessary to measure, calculate and reason in order to conceptualize, analyze, integrate and synthesize information.

Communication
A student must be able to speak, hear, read, write and comprehend English to a level to avoid confusion of words and meaning and to effectively elicit and convey information.

Motor/tactile function
A student must possess sufficient motor function to develop the skills required to safely perform a physical examination of a patient, including palpation, auscultation, percussion or other diagnostic maneuvers. A student must be able to use common diagnostic equipment (stethoscope, otoscope) either directly or in an adaptive form.

Professionalism
A student must consistently display integrity, honesty, empathy, compassion, fairness and respect for others. The student must be able to tolerate physical, emotional and mental demands of the program and function safely and effectively under stress.

Discuss and Analyze Essential Skills and Abilities Criteria

Questions to ask: What is the specific knowledge or skill that is required (essential) if the criteria are to be met? “Essential” can be defined by two criteria:

1. The skill (or knowledge) must be demonstrated to meet the objectives of the program; and
2. The skill (or knowledge) must be demonstrated in a prescribed manner

Think about what is non-negotiable and absolutely necessary and why. If we are clear about what is being taught and why it must be done in a prescribed way, it is easier to find solutions for the needs of students with disabilities.

Support Available to Units and Faculty Members to Assist Them in Developing Essential Skills and Abilities Requirements

Sufficient and appropriate resources will be available through the Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL) to assist academic units develop essential skills and abilities requirements. Units will receive a specific timeline for the development of their essential skills and abilities requirements after Senate approves the process outlined in this document. In addition, a CATL Educational Specialist will contact units to determine the level of assistance that will be required. At a minimum, units will be expected to submit draft essential skills and abilities requirements to CATL for review and comment.

The goal is to complete the development essential skills and abilities requirements for all existing programs by Fall 2015.

Maintaining Essential Skills and Abilities Requirements

A recommendation will be made to the Senate Committee on Academic Review that the Academic Program Reviews Procedures be amended to include a provision that essential skills and abilities requirements be reviewed and updated during the regular program review process.