

ABHE Standards and Graduate Education

Connecting the Dots

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Policy on Substantive Change

2a. Addition of graduate/post-graduate degrees, certificates, or diplomas by an institution that previously offered only undergraduate degrees or certificates.

2b. Addition of doctoral degrees, certificates, or diplomas by an institution that previously offered only master's degrees or graduate certificates (requires a focused visit for approval).

2c. Addition of credentials or programs that represent a significant departure from existing programs offered at the time of the last comprehensive review:

- new major or concentration of 24 semester hours or more
- credential (degree, certificate, or diploma) that requires 50% of semester hours in a discipline not reflected in previously approved programs or credentials.
- Exception: required coursework in an already approved program offered over the past three years is not considered part of the 50% of semester hours in a new discipline for the purpose of determining significant departure.

Credit Hour Minimums

Standard 7: EE 13 [12]* – Policies ensuring a minimum of . . . 33% of semester hours required for a graduate degree are earned through instruction offered by the institution awarding the degree.

Standard 7: EE 20 – The equivalent of a minimum of 30 semester hours for a master's degree, 72 semester hours for the Master of Divinity degree, and 30 semester hours beyond the master's degree for a doctoral degree.

Standard 7: EE 12 [19]* – Advanced standing policies for master-level programs ensuring that a minimum of 50% of semester hours applied to degree requirements are awarded from curricula designed for and delivered at the graduate level.

Policy on Graduate Education: Advanced standing may be granted to students entering a graduate program with significant formal study equivalent to first year (foundational) graduate courses in the intended credential. Advanced standing is limited and governed by institutional policies, includes the criteria for validation, and is approved by the relevant faculty (master's-level or doctoral-level).

** Proposed renumbering to be voted on at the COA Delegate Assembly, Feb. 12, 2026, 12:00 pm*

Standard 7: EE 1 – Academic programs and related curricula* designed with content and rigor characteristic of higher education, and the knowledge and skills needed for lifelong learning commensurate with the level of education offered.

Standard 7: EE 4 – ~~Curriculum~~ Academic programs and related curricula* that progresses* from foundational to advanced studies appropriate to the degree and level of education offered.

Standard 7: EE 22 – Cohesive curriculum designed to advance students' academic knowledge, research skills, and professional expertise substantially beyond that required of undergraduate programs.

Standard 7: EE 24 – Doctoral-level programs that build upon and advance students beyond the levels of knowledge and competence required of master-level programs.

Standard 7: EE 25 – Doctoral-level programs that ensure doctoral students demonstrate comprehensive understanding and mastery of the knowledge and skills appropriate to the field of study.

** Proposed changes to be voted on at the COA Delegate Assembly, Feb. 12, 2026, 12:00 pm*

Policy on Graduate Education:

Master-level programs advance students' academic knowledge, research skills, and professional expertise substantially beyond that required of undergraduate programs as demonstrated through program outcomes, course workload, projects requiring application of principles, analysis, and evaluation, and advanced knowledge of the discipline or professional practice.

Doctoral-level programs build upon and advance students beyond the levels of knowledge and competence required of master-level programs. Program requirements and outcomes document understanding and application of principles at a very high level of expertise. Scholarship related to the discipline or demonstration of professional skills is expected.

1. Doctoral degree candidates are expected to demonstrate comprehensive and systematic understanding of a field of study and the mastery of skills and methods of research appropriate to that field.
2. Critical analysis, independent evaluation of primary and secondary sources, and synthesis of new and inter-related ideas through coherent argumentation are skills to be verified in doctoral candidates.
3. The ability to conceive, design, and implement a substantial project of inquiry resulting in advancement of professional practice or improved understanding of the discipline is demonstrated through a creative and original contribution of substance, such as a capstone project or dissertation.
4. The candidate also evidences the ability to communicate effectively an understanding of their field of focused research or development to peer-level academic audiences.

Standard 7: EE 2 – ~~Curriculum~~ Academic programs and related curricula*
designed to support development of a biblical worldview through Bible engagement and theological reflection.

Standard 7: EE 23 – Curricular requirements that ensure students demonstrate significant ability to engage in biblical integration and theological reflection in relation to their academic or professional disciplines through prerequisites, curricular requirements, or program-level learning outcomes.

** Proposed changes to be voted on at the COA Delegate Assembly, Feb. 12, 2026, 12:00 pm*

Policy on Graduate Education:

All graduate programs must ensure students demonstrate significant ability to engage in biblical integration and theological reflection in relation to their academic or professional disciplines. This may be accomplished through a variety of means, including

- prerequisites that establish a biblical foundation for graduate study (e.g., required undergraduate credit hours in Bible/theology or graduate prerequisite courses in Bible/theology),
- curricular requirements (e.g., program-specific courses that evidence biblical integration and theological reflection, biblical/theological research projects, position papers that reflect biblical integration and theological reflection),
- program-specific outcomes (e.g., exit examination scores, biblical/theological portfolio requirements, assessment results), or
- other means that demonstrate students completing programs have engaged in significant biblical and theological reflection related to their academic program.

Standard 2: EE 2 [3] – Clearly defined and measurable* student learning outcomes . . . appropriate to the credential awarded and accompanied by multiple measures that effectively assess the extent to which students are achieving the program’s stated outcomes.*

Policy on Outcomes:

Intended student learning outcomes must be articulated . . . for each academic program. Standard 2 allows for both quantitative and qualitative measures to assess outcomes. Measures that directly assess knowledge, skills, or the desired result identified in the intended outcome are required. Indirect measures, such as measures of opinions/perceptions, may be used in addition to direct measures.

** Proposed changes to be voted on at the COA Delegate Assembly, Feb. 12, 2026, 12:00 pm*

Policy on Graduate Education:

Master-level faculty . . . engage in the development and adoption of means for demonstrating master-level rigor consistent with the mission of the institution and programs offered at this level.

Master-level programs advance students' academic knowledge, research skills, and professional expertise substantially beyond that required of undergraduate programs as demonstrated through *program outcomes, course workload, projects requiring application of principles, analysis, and evaluation, and advanced knowledge of the discipline or professional practice.*

Policy on Graduate Education:

Doctoral-level programs requirements and outcomes document understanding and application of principles at a very high level of expertise. Scholarship related to the discipline or demonstration of professional skills is expected.

Doctoral degree candidates are expected to demonstrate comprehensive and systematic understanding of a field of study and the mastery of skills and methods of research appropriate to that field. ***Critical analysis, independent evaluation of primary and secondary sources, and synthesis of new and inter-related ideas . . . ability to conceive, design, and implement a substantial project of inquiry . . . communicate effectively an understanding of their field of focused research.***

Student Development and Success

Standard 6: EE 5 – Evaluation procedures and/or programs that reasonably ensure admitted students have attained the requisite educational level, possess the ability to achieve their educational goals successfully, and are adequately prepared for their desired level of study and instructional modality.

Standard 7: EE 21 – Appropriate prerequisite and/or curricular requirements to ensure that students are prepared to pursue graduate studies.

Policy on Graduate Education:

Successful completion of a bachelor's degree or the equivalent is required for admission to a graduate certificate or master's degree. Successful completion of a master's degree or the equivalent is required for admission to a specialist degree or doctoral degree. Individual programs may establish additional admission requirements.

Policy on Graduate Education:

“Equivalent” refers to alternative pathways for demonstrating that the applicant has acquired the knowledge and skills that would be comparable to a bachelor’s degree (for admission to master-level study) or a master’s degree (for admission to doctoral-level study). If employed, alternative pathways validate prior learning with documentation of one or more of the following:

- completion of a significant proportion of the prerequisite degree
- prior learning assessment,
- and/or student performance in academic courses at the level for which alternative admission is considered (e.g., provisional admission to limited study at the master-level or doctoral-level).

Policy on Graduate Education:

The number or percentage of students admitted via alternative pathways is limited by institutional policy. The policy also reasonably preserves the expectation of a baccalaureate degree for master-level work or a master's degree for doctoral-level work, except for individuals who are highly qualified as demonstrated through a combination of formal education and/or prior learning experiences.

Admission policy and criteria for alternative pathways are approved by the relevant faculty (master's-level or doctoral-level) and aligns with ABHE Standards for Accreditation.

Student Development and Success

Standard 6: EE 9 – Financial counseling services that help students make financial decisions regarding their education and inform students receiving financial assistance of related repayment obligations.

Standard 9: EE 3 – Services that address the needs of at-risk students and improve student achievement and retention.

Standard 9: EE 7 – Systems that encourage student input for the purpose of institutional decision-making.

Learning Resources and Services

Standard 8: EE 3 – A collection of learning resources appropriate to the curriculum, co-curriculum, and course offerings with regard to content, format, usage, and currency.

Standard 8: EE 4 – Availability of reference, technical, circulation [library] services, and other means of support to meet the research and information needs of the learning community.

Standard 8: EE 8 – Curricular requirements, instruction, and reference services supporting development of information literacy skills.

Policy on Graduate Education:

Master-level program resources and support: program outcomes, course workload, projects requiring application of principles, analysis, and evaluation, and advanced knowledge of the discipline or professional practice.

Doctoral-level program resources and support: Critical analysis, independent evaluation of primary and secondary sources, and synthesis of new and inter-related ideas, and implement a substantial project of inquiry.

Faculty Qualifications

Standard 4: EE 11 – Committed Christian faculty members who engage in the academic, spiritual, and vocational development of students.

Standard 4: EE 12 – Faculty members who possess earned and appropriately documented degrees from institutions accredited by agencies recognized by CHEA, USDE, or the appropriate provincial government [Canadian].

Standard 4: EE 13 – Graduate faculty members who have earned a terminal or doctoral degree and teach in an area of documented expertise. Faculty credentials based on factors other than degrees earned are justified by appropriate documentation.

Standard 1: EE 1 – Integrity in all program operations.

Policy on Graduate Education:

Graduate degree and certificate nomenclature accurately reflect the nature of study and conform with higher education norms. . . . Degree and certificate nomenclature comply with state or provincial requirements in the jurisdiction(s) where the degree may be earned.

Where the discipline is incorporated into the degree name (e.g., Master of Ministry, Master of Business Administration), the focused study must be in that discipline.

Institutions offering programs that include human subject research (i.e., social science programs such as education, counseling, leadership, etc.) must have an Institutional Research Board (IRB) or equivalent and clear policies requiring that human-subjects research conducted by students or faculty be reviewed and approved by this entity. Programs that include human subject research should include learning outcomes inclusive of research ethics.

Long-Term Commitments

Standard 4: EE 15 – A faculty of sufficient size and expertise to support the institution's mission, ensure the quality of curriculum, and provide effective leadership of educational programs.

Standard 5: EE 5 – Adequate institutional resources, including financial resources, facilities, equipment, supplies, and technology to support its mission, achieve educational goals, and ensure continuity of offerings.

Policy on Ethical Practices:

The institution retains the obligation to see students enrolled in the program through to the completion of the degree program. Should emergency circumstances demand immediate cancellation of a program, the institution has the obligation to facilitate the transfer of students to institutions where the degree program is offered. Students should not be inconvenienced by an institution's decision to cancel a program abruptly.