

# **4. PROJECT DEMANDS AND NEEDS**



**TECHNICAL MEETING INAUGURATION**

1. On July 11, 2002, the IDB and the UTPL signed an agreement formalizing the terms and conditions of a nonrefundable technical support grant to the UTPL from the net income of the Special Operations Funds.
2. Subsequently, an inter-institutional agreement was signed between the Inter-American Distance Education Consortium (CREAD), the Ibero-American Association of Higher Distance Education (AIESAD), and the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja (UTPL). The agreement established the rights and obligations of the participants related to the coordination, supervision, and execution of the program were established according to the terms and conditions previously agreed to with the IDB to establish the Virtual Center at the UTPL and the commitment of the AIESAD and the CREAD to assist with its maintenance with the contributions and means within their reach.
3. As stipulated by the agreement, the Coordinating Committee was formed, with the principal function of supervising the execution of the project and assuring the adequate scheduling and coordinating of the planned activities, including the identification of services to be contracted, and preparing the Reference Terms for them. The Coordinating Committee (executive directors of the UTPL, the CREAD and the AIESAD), members of the "Academic Group", composed of academics from relevant specialized institutions, and international specialists in the methodology, were invited to participate.
4. In order to implement the program "Virtual Center for the Development of Higher Distance Education Quality Standards in Latin America and the Caribbean," consultants were contracted in accordance with IDB regulations, and a timetable of activities and resource use plan for the program were developed.

## TIMETABLE

<b>PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION</b>	Implementation Dates	
	From	To
<b>Phase 1: Development of the Quality Standards frameworks</b>		
Form coordinating committee	5/29/09	
Sign agreement between UTPL and IDB	7/11/02	
Sign inter-institutional agreement between the executing organization, CREAD and AIESAD	11/04/02	
Create and initiate the Academic Group	10/01/02	7/15/03
Identify consultant services and evaluate reference terms	10/01/02	11/12/02
Declare eligibility for IDB disbursements	12/18/02	
Submit disbursement solicitation form and resource use plan	12/18/03	

<b>ACTIVITY ONE: Analysis of higher distance education courses and the benefits of quality standards</b>		
Sign contracts with consultants 1 and 2	02/01/03	
Present initial report (15 days from contract signing) with the work plan and the tasks that will be implemented	02/15/03	
Present a draft of work completed and contracted prior to the technical meeting	02/22/03	
Submit amended report on the representative sample of courses available in Latin America and the Caribbean and input on the pilot test	05/15/03	
Submit the amended report on the proposed standards that can be used to evaluate the international virtual and distance courses	07/15/03	
Submit final report on the work completed and the successes achieved including the recommendations for the consultancy	07/30/03	
Present final report from consultants 1 and 2 to IDB	08/15/03	

<b>ACTIVITY TWO: Review of draft report from consultants 1 and 2</b>		
Sign contract with consultant 3 (contract 2)	02/01/03	
Submit initial report (30 days from the contract signing) with the work plan and corresponding timeline	03/03/03	
Submit report on comments on “document b”, fourth clause of contract	07/04/03	
Submit final report with criteria and input on the pilot test	07/11/03	
Present final report from consultant 3 (contract 2) to IDB	07/25/03	
<b>Activity Three: Meeting of Experts</b>		
Hold technical meeting	02/24/03	02/27/03
Develop final document	03/10/03	

<b>PHASE 2: CREATION OF A COMMUNICATION SYSTEM PROTOTYPE</b>		
Sign contract with consultant four	02/01/03	
Report on the analysis of data model that will include plan and tasks to be implemented with implementation timetable (15 days from contract signing)	02/15/03	
Submit reports on interface design and modular development	03/18/03	
Submit report on system adjustments after technical meeting and pilot test model	03/25/03	
Initiate pilot test, execute and collect feedback on database	03/26/03	06/30/03
Prepare final report on communication system, operations, and adjustments made during pilot test	07/12/03	
Present final report from consultant 4 to IDB	07/15/03	
Present technical report detailing standards produced and results of pilot test to IDB	09/10/03	
Present financial report	09/10/03	

- Once the framework document on quality standards was developed by the consultants, it was revised and consolidated in a technical meeting held in the departmental offices of the UTPL in Loja, Ecuador, February 24—27, 2003. In this meeting the experts, the academic team, the coordinating committee, and the international specialists discussed and modified the

contents of the working paper in preparation for publication. The discussions focused fundamentally on the proposed quality standards and indicators in the working paper that, once revised, have served as catalysts for subsequent online exchanges between the specialists.

6. The technical meeting participants also identified the technical needs for the use of standards. In the technical meeting, the participants reviewed a first draft of what would become the online communication system, created to facilitate the use of the evaluation model by users as well as universities, educational authorities, and researchers.

In the technical meeting (see Report)<sup>1</sup> the many concerns expressed by administrators of regional universities about distance education were taken into account:

It was recognized that, although there are currently many different accreditation and evaluation measures in place in the region, the participation of most of the important universities signifies that momentum is building for an improvement in the quality of distance education.

Project participants felt that it was important to discuss areas of disagreement as well as areas of agreement about theories of Quality Standards in distance education to facilitate the development of a superior service.

According to international reports, we are now moving into a phase when the boundaries between distance and on site education are disappearing; it is predicted that the universities will begin to use both modalities for the same courses. It is understood that the distance modality, in some cases considered second-rate, has now emerged as an attractive option, not only for universities with a social mission but for other universities interested in the benefits of virtual education.

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<sup>1</sup> “Centro virtual para el desarrollo de estándares de calidad para la educación superior a distancia en América Latina y el Caribe” - Memorias (Reunión Técnica 24/28 febrero 2003). Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja. Loja - Ecuador

There is no doubt that in the future the majority of universities will function internationally; this means that we need a way to objectively measure the quality of these institutions, both within and outside their home countries.

For those universities that have opted for a responsible distance methodology, it is in their best interests to demand of themselves a high standard of quality, since they will serve as the benchmark by which other universities are measured.

Within the group of experts, it was recognized that understanding the meaning of quality in education can occur either at the level of the individual specialist or the university. In order to arrive at a useful definition, both perspectives should be incorporated. The fundamental vision of the project is to develop a shared understanding of a meaning of quality that can be applied with confidence.

One problem is that there is no common language when we talk of standards, and for that reason it is necessary to reach agreement.

The standards model presented has provided material for reflection and debate. With a comprehensive vision of quality, the experiences of many institutions and models supporting distance education have been considered. Based on the opinions of the experts, the proposed standards are a realistic outcome of the process used to define them, keeping in mind the following three points:

1. This project is nothing more than a proposal but is understood to be a significant contribution.
2. This is an exceedingly ambitious proposal; for that reason, there is a risk of suppressing the less interesting parts and extracting an oversimplified version.
3. This is a provisional proposal with detailed criteria, standards, and indicators that require measurement and evaluation instruments in order to develop the second phase of the project.

Recognizing that the term “standard” is ambiguous, the participants agreed that a term was needed to convey the general concept of quality and that the

proposed model should include not only suggestions for points of discussion but also a glossary to support understanding of the proposal.

After the technical meeting the experts as well as the members of the coordinating committee, the academic group, the executive entity and the specialists, stayed in communication to refine the working paper. Likewise, contact was maintained throughout the implementation of the pilot test, enhanced by the participation of individuals and institutions—in addition to the institutions selected for the test—who supported it with their comments.