



**Psychotherapy & Counselling  
Federation of Australia**

**Course Accreditation Guidelines**

## **Introduction, Background and Rationale for Course Accreditation**

Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) is an umbrella organisation representing 43 professional bodies with over 3,000 fully qualified members in the field of counselling and psychotherapy in Australia.

PACFA proposes to introduce a course accreditation process for counselling and psychotherapy courses in Australia.

PACFA was established to undertake important self-regulatory functions for the profession such as setting standards of training, establishing a Register of qualified practitioners, undertaking research and policy development for the profession, and ensuring good ethical standards and accountability to the public.

Many of these self-regulatory functions need to be built on a foundational process of course accreditation. Without a rigorous and accountable course accreditation process, it is difficult to demonstrate public accountability for our membership standards, Register status and so on. It is also clear, through discussion with government and other bodies around issues such as GST exemption and health fund rebates, that a rigorous independent process of course accreditation is a key component of gaining wider recognition for our profession.

Another rationale for undertaking a course accreditation process is that there is a very clear demand from the public for this. PACFA receives many, many enquiries regarding counselling and psychotherapy courses in Australia from prospective students who would like a 'stamp of approval' that would enable them to select a course with confidence about the quality of the course and recognition by the profession. To date we have been unable to respond to these enquiries. This is a reasonable expectation given the cost and commitment required in undertaking such courses. We believe we would serve our members and the public better if we could provide an authoritative answer on which courses meet the PACFA Training Standards. We present this process, whereby courses in counselling and psychotherapy can be recognised by PACFA.

Following discussion at the PACFA conference and AGM on program accreditation in August 2003, a discussion paper was made available through PACFA and SCAPE and feedback gathered.

The PACFA AGM held in Melbourne 22 August 2004 gave in principle approval for the development of a course accreditation process for counselling and psychotherapy courses in Australia.

In 2004 communication was made with all training and education institutions in the field of counselling and psychotherapy in Australia. PACFA received 48 responses to the request for a snapshot of their counselling or psychotherapy training. This represented an estimated 3,200 students. The institutions responding include 13 university providers and 35 private providers. The responses were largely positive and supportive for course accreditation.

Part of the rationale in establishing PACFA was to create a minimum set of national standards for training in Psychotherapy and Counselling in Australia. This has been achieved.

## Course Accreditation Counselling and Psychotherapy Guidelines - April 2007

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As a result of this commitment the PACFA Professional Training Standards were born as part of a lengthy consultation process. We now have an agreed standard for counselling and psychotherapy education in Australia. A system of accrediting educational programs against these standards is needed in order for the public to be fully informed of what programs meet the minimum standards. It is not sufficient to ask members of the public to read the training standards. It has now come time to have a structure to accredit educational programs against these standards. Program accreditation strengthens the profession and promotes a consistent quality of educational offerings for counselling and psychotherapy.

Accordingly, it seems appropriate at this time to have a process that leads to the 'PACFA Accredited Program' indicating that a training program has fulfilled the training standards and is committed to continuing to meet or exceed the requirements.

In late 2004, early 2005, a second communication was sent to training providers as well as member associations of PACFA and SCAPE members. This presented a model of course accreditation and requested feedback. Twenty were received. A number of issues and concerns were raised in this feedback. This feedback was then presented and discussed at the March 2004 PACFA Council Meeting.

Now, in this course accreditation model and guidelines, a number of these concerns have been addressed. The process has been simplified and the guidelines are now briefer and more sensitive to the needs of smaller training providers. Two further significant issues have also been addressed.

Firstly, the need to require reference to professional course accreditation processes, where one exists, that has the support of the field. These accreditation processes are those that have been through an extensive process of consultation to reach agreement across a specialist area of the field of counselling and psychotherapy. It is agreed that the task of mapping and recognising such accreditation processes against the PACFA Training Standards is an important one so that duplication can be minimised.

Secondly, there was concern over duplication with regard to institutes that have already been approved through government or university registration and/or accreditation processes for either vocational education or higher education. It is agreed to establish the principle of minimising duplication in this area so that institutes are being fairly and sufficiently evaluated.

These guidelines were discussed at the PACFA Council meeting in April 2006 in Adelaide.

The following motion was passed at the April 2006 PACFA Council meeting:

*"The proposed model and guidelines for the establishment of the Education Program Accreditation Committee (EPAC) PACFA are adopted. Between now and the August PACFA AGM feedback will be sought from unofficial course accreditation pilots conducted with up to 3 psychotherapy/counselling programs. This is to be reported on to the PACFA AGM in August 2006."*

In August 2006, a report was given to the PACFA Annual General Meeting of the successful completion of four pilot course accreditation pilots.

### Course accreditation and PACFA Member Associations

Some confusion exists for some member associations as to why we need a course accreditation process when member associations recall having already been through a course accreditation process when the member association applied in the first place to become a member of PACFA. David Axten and Jan Grant explain why more is needed:

## Course Accreditation Counselling and Psychotherapy Guidelines - April 2007

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David Axten 16 November 2004:

*When the Register was first introduced, applications went via member associations who usually had knowledge of courses in their area. PACFA is able to verify the existence of courses and their length and level, but has no system for site visits nor real means to verify some aspects of training standards. This is precisely why PACFA needs additional information about some courses, and the means to verify the implementation of PACFA training standards, as part of being accountable for its Register. ie being more stringent in its audit process.*

Jan Grant 10 November 2004:

*PACFA currently does not assess courses. PACFA assesses professional associations for association membership of PACFA. Most membership associations take in members from a variety of training institutes/universities. A few take most of their members from one training institute. In this case, the member association often sends in the course work or training standards for the institute. This is then used by the training standards committee to ensure that the member association is taking in members that meet PACFA criteria. This is only done in a fairly cursory way to ensure that the training meets the main criteria. Accreditation would be a much more careful process of reviewing actual courses and ensuring that they meet all the guidelines.*

PACFA now offers a course accreditation process beginning in March 2007.

### **Functions of the Education Program Accreditation Committee PACFA**

The Education Program Accreditation Committee PACFA shall be responsible for the accreditation of education and training programs in psychotherapy and counselling in Australia. In carrying out that responsibility, consistent with the provisions of the PACFA Training Standards, the Education Program Accreditation Committee PACFA shall:

1. Be responsible for formulating and promulgating its accreditation policies, procedures and criteria;
2. Be responsible for accreditation decisions on education and training programs of psychotherapy and counselling in Australia;
3. Undertake timely and appropriate self-review analysis of its own objectives, criteria, policies, procedures, and practices;
4. Provide appropriate consultative guidance and general information about the accreditation process and its purposes;
5. Establish guidelines for the selection, training, and evaluation of accreditation site visitors;
6. Conduct evaluative and developmental research appropriate to accreditation;
7. Have authority to appoint consultants, program review panels, and task forces in the discharge of its duties, within authorised policy and budget: and
8. Discharge such other responsibilities as necessary to fulfil its role.

### **Structure, Sources, and Numbers of Seats on the Education Program Accreditation Committee PACFA**

EPAC PACFA is comprised of members who include educators in the field of counselling and psychotherapy, practitioners from the profession, as well as representation from the general public.

There shall be six persons appointed to the Education Program Accreditation Committee PACFA providing a range of viewpoints expected in accrediting bodies and their activities. In the interests of accountability to the wider community, at least two members should not be members of a PACFA member association.

1. Representative with academic expertise in education in the profession of psychotherapy and/or counselling (eg. Director of Training or Course Coordinator) (1 seat nominated by SCAPE);
2. Representative with expertise in accreditation of psychotherapy and/or counselling education programs (1 seat nominated by SCAPE);
3. Representative from small private counselling and psychotherapy training program with less than 50 students (1 seat nominated by PACFA);
4. Practitioners of the profession apart from those involved in the leadership of training programs (1 seat nominated by PACFA);
5. Consumers of education and training, to be represented by a member of the general public (1 seat nominated by PACFA): and
6. Representative from employer groups who employ counsellors and/or psychotherapists (1 seat nominated by PACFA).

### **Intentions and Purpose of Accreditation Process**

The accreditation process is intended to promote consistent quality and excellence in education and training in psychotherapy and counselling and, thus, to provide tangible benefits for prospective students, the local, national, and international publics that are consumers of psychotherapy or counselling services (including referring professionals and agencies), and the discipline of psychotherapy and counselling itself.

Accreditation is a voluntary, non-governmental process of self-review and external review intended to evaluate, enhance, and publicly recognise quality in institutions and in programs of higher education.

Accreditation is intended to protect the interests of students, benefit the public, and improve the quality of teaching, learning, research, and professional practice. EPAC PACFA seeks to encourage institutional freedom, ongoing improvement of educational institutions and training programs, sound educational experimentation, and constructive innovation.

The accreditation process involves judging the degree to which a program has met the PACFA Training Standards and achieved the goals and objectives of its stated training model. That is, an accreditation body should not explicitly prescribe a program's educational goals or the processes by which they should be reached; rather, it should judge the degree to which a program achieves outcomes and goals that are consistent with its stated training model and with the guiding principles contained in this document and the PACFA Training Standards.

Thus, accreditation in psychotherapy and counselling is intended to:

- Achieve general agreement on the goals of training;
- Encourage experimentation on methods of achieving those goals: and
- Suggest ways of establishing high standards in a setting of flexibility and reasonable freedom.

### **Professional Judgment**

This document reflects shared assumptions about the attributes of high-quality training. It is assumed that the EPAC PACFA will use these shared assumptions, the collective professional judgment of its members, and the accreditation guidelines and principles to reach an informed, fair, and reasonable decision about a program's eligibility for accreditation review and/or its accreditability.

The EPAC PACFA, in representing a broad array of constituencies, has the authority to adopt implementing regulations that elucidate, interpret, and operationally define its guidelines and principles, procedures, domains, and standards.

### **Eligibility Requirements**

The Education Program Accreditation Committee (EPAC) PACFA defines a program as a structured sequence of educational and clinical experiences for which accreditation is sought.

In the context of these standards, "programs" are housed within an identifiable program team. As an example, an institution might have a program team that includes both an undergraduate Counselling program and a postgraduate Counselling program.

The Education Program Accreditation Committee (EPAC) PACFA recognises that alternative instruction methods (for example, distance learning) are currently used in many counsellor education programs. The following principles apply when evaluating these programs:

1. Programs that use alternative instruction methods will be evaluated with the same standards for accreditation as programs that employ more traditional methods;
2. Accreditation for such programs will be based on their demonstrated compliance with the PACFA training standards: and
3. Programs that use alternative instruction methods are subject to the same level of review as programs that employ more traditional methods.

The PACFA Training Standards are minimal criteria for the preparation of professional counsellors and/or psychotherapists. Applicants seeking accreditation must document how each program meets the PACFA Training Standards, which specify the minimum standards required.

1. Undergraduate programs will be for a minimum of three years study at the standard of a bachelor degree program (or equivalent) as specified within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF – see [www.aqf.edu.au](http://www.aqf.edu.au)). Postgraduate programs will be for a minimum of two years of study. The PACFA Training Standards further specify the required hours for both undergraduate and postgraduate programs;
2. The program team that oversees the program(s) will have a minimum of two (2) core staff members whose academic appointments are in counsellor or psychotherapist education; one of the team members will be designated as the program team leader;

3. The educational experiences and demonstrated knowledge required are specified in the PACFA Training Standards (see <http://www.pacfa.org.au>);
4. The program team is located in and supported by an educational institution accredited by one of the State or national accrediting bodies recognised in the vocational or higher education sector. Educational institutions that do not have such vocational or higher education accreditation, who wish to accredit counselling or psychotherapy education programs through EPAC PACFA, will need to demonstrate that they have met a similar standard with sufficient systems of quality and academic governance to enable professional level educational programs;
5. The program(s) require(s) supervised experiences, including practical experience for all students, as identified in the PACFA Training Standards: and
6. Programs seeking accreditation must have a comprehensive program rationale and objectives or overall vision of what the program seeks to achieve underpinned by a coherent body of professional knowledge.

## **Application for Accreditation**

### **Eligibility Requirements Checklist**

Please provide documentation illustrating that each of the six (6) Eligibility Requirements listed below is met. Please refer to the previous pages for a complete statement of each of those requirements. For each item on the checklist, please reference page numbers where documentation can be found in the submission or attach copies of original documentation to this application.

1. Undergraduate programs will be for a minimum of three years study. Postgraduate programs will be for a minimum of two years of study;
2. A minimum of two (2) core staff are required, one of whom is designated as program team leader. A common core of educational experiences is identified and required;
3. Delivery approaches and content of courses needs to meet the PACFA Training Standards;
4. Institution in which program team is housed is accredited by a State, national or accrediting body recognised in the vocational or higher education sector. Please name the accrediting body and provide evidence of accreditation. Educational institutions that do not have such vocational or higher education accreditation, who wish to accredit counselling or psychotherapy education programs through EPAC PACFA, will need to demonstrate that they have met a similar standard with sufficient systems of quality and academic governance to enable professional level educational programs;
5. Practical experiences are required for all students: and
6. A comprehensive program rationale has been developed or overall vision of what the program seeks to achieve underpinned by a coherent body of professional knowledge.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The counselling and psychotherapy profession evolves in anticipation of and response to societal and other changes in Australia and throughout the world. Counsellor and Psychotherapy Education programs prepare students to be effective in a dynamic world and profession. It is imperative that programs explicitly prepare students to be counsellors and/or psychotherapists first and area specialists second.

The PACFA Training Standards are written to ensure that students develop a professional identity and also master the knowledge and skills to practice effectively. Graduates of PACFA accredited programs use their education and preparation as paths to careers in community mental health and human service agencies, educational institutions, and private practice, government, business and industrial settings. However, no professional preparation program is ever complete, and advances in knowledge, skills and technology within the profession require life-long continuing education for counsellors and psychotherapists as well as monitoring and review of professional standards.

The Education Program Accreditation Committee (EPAC) PACFA policy requires periodic review, permitting standards revision, including development of new standards or the elimination of obsolete standards. The educational experiences required by these revised standards are based on due notice and consultation with the professional community and represent collective and informed judgment about their relevancy and appropriateness.

These standards are not intended to discourage creativity on the part of program faculties. Programs wishing to justify variations from these standards may submit statements of rationale as part of their submission. The Education Program Accreditation Committee (EPAC) PACFA will determine whether those variations accomplish the outcomes that the standards are designed to ensure.

## **SECTION I THE INSTITUTION**

- A. The institution in which the program team is housed is accredited by a State or national accrediting body in the vocational or higher education sector. Educational institutions that do not have such vocational or higher education accreditation, who wish to accredit counselling or psychotherapy education programs through EPAC PACFA, will need to demonstrate that they have met a similar standard with sufficient systems of quality and academic governance to enable professional level educational programs.
- B. The current institutional academic calendar, brochure, handbook, catalogue or bulletin accurately describes the program team and each program offered, including admissions criteria, minimum program requirements, academic policy requirements (for example, assessment and grading policy), and financial information.
- C. The program team is clearly identified as part of the institution's academic offerings and has primary responsibility for the preparation of students in the program. If more than one program team has responsibility for the preparation of students in the program, the respective areas of responsibility and the relationships among and between them must be clearly defined.
- D. Cooperative relationships exist between the program team and other program teams that contribute to the professional preparation of students in the program as well as off-campus professional and community resources.
- E. The institution is committed to providing the program with sufficient support to ensure continuity, quality, and effectiveness in all of the program's learning environments.

- F. The institution provides encouragement and support for program staff to participate in professional organisations and activities (for example attendance and participation in professional conferences, and leadership positions in PACFA Member Associations).
- G. The institution makes available to students in the program student support services including referral to counselling services where appropriate.
- H. Access to library and other learning resources is appropriate for scholarly inquiry, study, and research by program staff and students.
- I. The institution provides support to program staff and students to ensure access to information systems and data analysis for teaching and research.

## **SECTION II PROGRAM OBJECTIVES AND COURSE WORK**

- A. A comprehensive program rationale has been developed that brings the program into focus and concisely describes the program's intent and purpose. The program rationale:
  - 1. Describes the types of students it serves, its campus location and the priorities and expectations of the staff;
  - 2. is the basis for the development of program objectives and course work;
  - 3. Is published and available to staff and students; and,
  - 4. Is reviewed at least once every five (5) years and revised as needed.
- B. The program objectives
  - 1. Reflect current knowledge and positions from lay and professional groups concerning the counselling, psychotherapy and human development needs of a pluralistic society;
  - 2. Reflect the present and projected needs of a pluralistic society for which specialised counselling, psychotherapy and human development activities have been developed;
  - 3. Reflect input from all persons involved in the conduct of the program, including program staff, current and former students, and personnel in cooperating agencies;
  - 4. Are directly related to program activities; and,
  - 5. Are written so that they can be assessed.
- C. Programs at the undergraduate level are for a minimum of three years of study. Programs at the postgraduate level are for a minimum of two years of study.
- D. Students actively identify with the counselling and psychotherapy profession by participating in professional associations such as the Member Associations of PACFA (see [www.pacfa.org.au](http://www.pacfa.org.au)), and by participating in seminars, workshops, or other activities that contribute to personal and professional growth.

- E. Consistent with established institutional due process policy and SCAPE (Society of Counselling and Psychotherapy Educators) Ethical Standards (see [http://www.scape.org.au/adobe/SCAPE\\_Code\\_of\\_Ethics.pdf](http://www.scape.org.au/adobe/SCAPE_Code_of_Ethics.pdf)), when evaluations indicate that a student is not appropriate for the program, staff should assist in facilitating the student's transition out of the program and, if possible, into a more appropriate area of study.
- F. Flexibility is provided within the program's course work to accommodate individual differences in student knowledge and competencies.
- G. Syllabi are distributed at the beginning of each educational experience, are available for review by all enrolled or prospective students, and include all of the following:
  - 1. Objectives;
  - 2. Content areas;
  - 3. Required text(s) and/or reading(s);
  - 4. Methods of instruction, including a clear description of how content is delivered (eg, lecture, seminar, supervised practical application, distance learning); and,
  - 5. Student performance evaluation criteria and procedures.
- H. Educational experiences and demonstrated knowledge in each of the areas specified in the PACFA Training Standards are required of all students in the program.

### **SECTION III Practical Experience**

Practical experience includes supervised practical experience that has been completed within a student's program of study. Practical experience requirements are considered to be the most critical experience elements in the program. All staff, including clinical instruction staff and supervisors, are clearly committed to preparing professional counsellors and psychotherapists and promoting the development of the student's professional identity.

- A. Each regular or adjunct program staff member who provides individual or group practical experience and/or internship supervision must have
  - 1. A relevant degree and/or appropriate professional knowledge acquired through a formal training program, preferably from an accredited counsellor or psychotherapy education program;
  - 2. Relevant professional experience and demonstrated competence in counselling or psychotherapy; and,
  - 3. Relevant training and supervision experience.
- B. A site supervisor must have
  - 1. A minimum of a bachelor's degree or equivalent in counselling, psychotherapy or a related profession with equivalent qualifications, including appropriate certifications;
  - 2. A minimum of two (2) years of pertinent professional experience in the program area in which the student is enrolled; and,

3. Knowledge of the program's expectations, requirements, and evaluation procedures for students.
- C. The practical experience environment, on- or off-campus, is conducive to modelling, demonstration, and training and is available and used by the program. The practical experience environment is such that it ensures adequate and appropriate access by the staff and students. The practical experience environment includes the following:
1. settings with observational and/or other interactive supervision capabilities; and,
  2. procedures that ensure that the client's confidentiality and legal rights are protected.
- E. An ability to negotiate or access technology as required.
- F. Students must complete supervised practicum experiences as detailed in the PACFA Training Standards.
- G. Students formally evaluate their supervisors and learning experience at the end of their practical experiences.

## **Section IV PROGRAM STAFF**

- A. The counsellor or psychotherapy education program team must demonstrate that it has resources of appropriate quality and sufficiency to achieve its objectives. The program team has an identifiable core staff responsible for its leadership who:
1. Are sufficient in number for their academic and professional responsibilities;
  2. Number at least two (2) individuals whose academic appointments are to the unit in counsellor or psychotherapy education;
  3. Have relevant degrees appropriate to counsellor or psychotherapy education, preferably from PACFA accredited programs, or degrees in a closely related field;
  4. Have relevant preparation and experience in the assigned area of teaching;
  5. Identify with the counselling or psychotherapy profession through memberships and involvement in appropriate professional organisations (i.e. PACFA Member Associations); and,
  6. Give feedback to determine program curricula within the structure of the institution's policy.
- B. The program team has clearly defined administrative and educational leadership that is sufficient for its effective operation.
- C. Core staff should have engaged in activities of PACFA, PACFA Member Associations and/or other professional activities including the following:
1. Development/renewal (eg, attended appropriate professional meetings, conferences, workshops, seminars);

2. Research and scholarly activity: and,
  
  3. service (eg, program presentations, workshops, consultations, speeches, direct service).
- D. Program staff members are assigned to provide educational services only in areas for which they have demonstrated knowledge and skills.

## **Section V ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION**

- A. Program descriptions and requirements are published and disseminated to all prospective students.
- B. A clear procedure for responding to inquiries of prospective students has been identified and carried out.
- C. Prior to, or at the beginning of the first term of enrolment in the program, the following should occur for all new students:
1. A new student orientation is conducted; and
  2. A student handbook is disseminated that includes the institution's and/or program's:
    - a. academic appeal policy;
    - b. student retention policy explaining procedures for possible student remediation and/or dismissal from the program;
    - c. information about appropriate professional organisations (i.e., PACFA Member Associations), involvements, and activities potentially appropriate to students in the program: and
    - d. program rationale and program objectives.
- D. The program has procedures for disseminating current information to all students enrolled in the program, and associated personnel.
- E. The recommended ratio of students to staff is 20: 1.
- F. A written policy has been developed to recruit students to represent a multicultural and diverse society has been developed and is implemented by program staff.
- G. The program admissions criteria, as well as selection and retention procedures, are distributed to prospective students. These criteria must meet the minimum requirements of the PACFA Training Standards. These include consideration of:
1. Input from program staff;
  2. Potential success in forming effective interpersonal relationships in individual and small-group contexts;
  3. Aptitude for study, including technological competence and computer literacy;
  4. Career goals and objectives and their relevance to the program; and

5. Openness to self-examination and personal and professional self-development.
- H. An appropriately delegated authority within the institution makes admission decision recommendations.
- I. Students receive appropriate academic advice throughout their enrolment in the program. Students follow a planned program of study. The planned program of study identifies the following:
1. Program prerequisite educational and/or professional experiences;
  2. Core educational requirements;
  3. Specialised educational experiences;
  4. Supervised practical experience: and
  5. Appropriate elective educational requirements.

## **Section VI PROGRAM EVALUATION**

- A. Program objectives and student learning outcomes are developed and revised when necessary through review on a regular schedule. This evaluation process is based on input from program staff, current and former students, and personnel in cooperating agencies.
- B. The program staff conduct a developmental, systematic assessment of each student's progress throughout the program, including consideration of the student's academic performance, professional development, and personal development.
- C. Staff establishes a comprehensive, integrated plan of program evaluation, indicating how the objectives and student learning outcomes are met. Program evaluations must be ongoing, with formal evaluation occurring as follows:
1. an annual evaluation that documents how, where, and the extent to which program objectives are addressed in course syllabi;
  2. a review by program staff of programs, educational offerings, and characteristics of program applicants;
  3. at least once every three years, program staff conduct and document findings of formal follow-up studies of program graduates to assess graduate perceptions and evaluations of major aspects of the program;
  4. at least once every three years, program staff conduct and document findings of formal follow-up studies of clinical site supervisors and program graduate employers to assess their perceptions and evaluations of major aspects of the program; and
  5. at least once every three years, program staff document use of findings from VI. C.1, 2, 3, and 4 above in program modifications.
- D. An official report that documents outcomes of the comprehensive program evaluation shall be prepared and distributed on a systematic basis (at least once

**Course Accreditation Counselling and Psychotherapy  
Guidelines - April 2007**

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every three years) to students currently in the program, program staff, institutional administrators, and personnel in cooperating agencies (eg, employers, site supervisors).

**Course Accreditation Counselling and Psychotherapy  
Guidelines - April 2007**

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- E. Students have regular and systematic opportunities to formally evaluate staff and the students' educational experiences.
- F. Provide annual results of student course evaluations to staff.
- G. Present written staff evaluation procedures to program staff at the beginning of each evaluation period and whenever changes are made in the procedures.

*Acknowledgment: These standards draw on the 2001 Standards of CACREP (Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Education Programs) which is the equivalent body in the United States of America. Used with permission.*