GCTEQA

GLOBAL COMMISSION FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION & QUALITY ASSURANCE, INC.

ACCREDITATION REVIEWER & EVALUATOR HANDBOOK

2026 Reviewer Training Edition

Evidence. Fairness. Independence. Professional Judgment.

Training and operating guidance for peer reviewers, evaluators, lead reviewers, panelists, and accreditation decision participants.

Document Control

Document	Accreditation Reviewer & Evaluator Handbook
Organization	Global Commission for Theological Education & Quality Assurance, Inc. (GCTEQA)
Edition	2026 Reviewer Training Edition
Audience	Peer reviewers, evaluators, lead reviewers, site/virtual review participants, panelists, and designated accreditation personnel
Relationship to Policy	This handbook implements GCTEQA standards and policies; it does not replace the Bylaws or governing policies.
Review Cycle	At least annually or when standards, review procedures, or reviewer expectations materially change

Reviewer Commitment
Reviewers evaluate institutions against published GCTEQA standards and the record before them. Reviewers do not sell accreditation, guarantee outcomes, impose personal beliefs, or substitute preference for evidence.

1. Purpose of This Handbook

This handbook provides practical guidance for conducting fair, consistent, evidence-based accreditation reviews. It explains reviewer qualifications, conflicts, evidence evaluation, interviews, virtual and site review practices, rating standards, report writing, confidentiality, professionalism, and the handoff from evaluation to independent accreditation decision-making.

2. Reviewer Role

Reviewers are fact-finders and professional evaluators. They determine whether the evidence supports findings under applicable standards and document the basis for those findings. Reviewers may identify strengths, deficiencies, risks, and follow-up needs, but they do not promise or independently grant accreditation unless they are separately serving on an authorized decision body.

3. Core Reviewer Principles

- Apply the published standard, not a personal standard.
- Evaluate the institution that exists, not the institution the reviewer would personally design.
- Distinguish evidence from assertion.
- Respect legitimate institutional mission differences across diverse traditions.
- Focus on material quality, integrity, learner protection, legality, and sustainability.
- Document both positive evidence and deficiencies.
- Use consistent professional language and avoid humiliation, hostility, sarcasm, or advocacy for a particular religious tradition.
- Protect confidential information and disclose conflicts promptly.

4. Reviewer Qualifications

GCTEQA should select reviewers whose education, professional experience, judgment, and integrity are appropriate to the assigned review. A review team may collectively provide expertise in:

- Institutional leadership and governance
- Accreditation and quality assurance
- Academic programs, curriculum, and assessment
- Theological or religious education when relevant
- Finance and organizational sustainability
- Student services and learner protection
- Online learning, technology, and data security
- Law, compliance, or regulatory matters
- Institutional effectiveness and continuous improvement

5. Reviewer Training and Calibration

- Orientation to GCTEQA mission, standards, definitions, and status categories
- Conflict-of-interest and accreditation-independence training
- Evidence sufficiency and materiality
- Use of Met / Partially Met / Not Met / Not Applicable findings
- Interview and site/virtual review techniques
- Report-writing expectations
- Confidentiality and data protection
- Bias awareness and respect for diverse theological/religious traditions
- Periodic calibration using sample cases or completed reports

6. Conflict of Interest and Independence

Before receiving full nonpublic institutional materials, a reviewer must complete the required conflict check and disclose any actual, potential, or perceived conflict.

- Current or recent employment by the institution
- Current or recent paid consulting, accreditation preparation, or substantial advisory service
- Ownership, governance, donor, vendor, or significant financial relationship
- Close family/personal relationship with key institutional leadership
- Serious adversarial, competitive, or litigation relationship
- Pending employment or business arrangement
- Any circumstance that could reasonably cause a neutral observer to question impartiality

When in doubt, disclose. GCTEQA determines whether reassignment, limits, or recusal are required.

7. Reviewer Confidentiality

- Use institutional evidence only for the assigned GCTEQA purpose.
- Do not share documents with unauthorized persons.
- Do not post or discuss reviews on social media.
- Avoid downloading sensitive material to unmanaged devices when possible.
- Minimize access to student-identifiable or sensitive personal information.
- Return, delete, or securely dispose of review materials according to GCTEQA instructions.

- Maintain confidentiality after the assignment ends.

8. Understanding the Review Record

A review record may include the application, self-study, evidence files, public website, catalogs and handbooks, clarifications, interviews, technology demonstrations, site/virtual observations, prior monitoring, complaint history relevant to standards, and other authorized materials.

Reviewers should rely on the official review record and should not conduct unauthorized investigations or contact third parties independently unless directed by GCTEQA.

9. Evidence Quality

Strong evidence is usually current, authentic, relevant, sufficient, internally consistent, and capable of reasonable verification.

Evidence Question	Reviewer Test
Current	Does it reflect present operations or a clearly relevant historical period?
Authentic	Does it appear genuine and attributable to the institution or a reliable source?
Relevant	Does it actually address the criterion being evaluated?
Sufficient	Is there enough evidence to support the finding?
Implemented	If it is a policy, is there evidence that the institution actually follows it?
Consistent	Does it align with other documents and public statements?

10. Evidence Triangulation

Reviewers should compare multiple sources when a material claim affects accreditation. For example, a published policy may be compared with meeting minutes, student-facing materials, records, interviews, or system demonstrations. Contradictions should be clarified rather than ignored.

11. Rating Framework

Finding	Use When	Reviewer Writing Focus
Met	Evidence demonstrates satisfactory compliance.	Identify the strongest evidence supporting the conclusion.
Partially Met	Some elements are present, but a meaningful gap remains.	State what is present, what is missing, and why the gap matters.

Not Met	Evidence does not demonstrate satisfactory compliance or reveals material noncompliance.	Tie the deficiency directly to the criterion and evidence.
Not Applicable	The criterion does not reasonably apply to the approved institutional scope or model.	Briefly explain why non-applicability is appropriate.

Ratings are not simple points. A serious legal, financial, student-protection, governance, or integrity deficiency may carry greater weight than several minor documentation gaps.

12. Materiality and Risk

- Potential harm to current or prospective learners
- Legal or regulatory noncompliance
- Misrepresentation of authorization, accreditation, credentials, or outcomes
- Academic integrity and validity of credentials
- Financial instability and ability to support students through completion
- Governance failures or unmanaged conflicts
- Technology, privacy, cybersecurity, safeguarding, or records risk
- Whether the problem is isolated, systemic, repeated, or longstanding
- Whether leadership recognizes the issue and has realistic corrective capacity

13. Preparing for the Review

- Read the institution profile and requested accreditation scope.
- Review assigned standards and evidence before interviews.
- Identify missing, contradictory, or unclear evidence.
- Prepare questions tied to standards, not curiosity alone.
- Confirm conflicts and confidentiality obligations.
- Coordinate with the lead reviewer so team members do not duplicate questions unnecessarily.
- Avoid forming a final conclusion before the complete record is reviewed.

14. Conducting Interviews

Interviews are used to clarify evidence, understand implementation, and test consistency. They are not interrogations.

- Ask open, neutral questions.
- Connect questions to a standard or material issue.
- Do not coach the institution toward a preferred answer.
- Do not debate theology, politics, or institutional philosophy unless directly relevant to a published criterion.
- Ask for examples of implementation when a policy appears strong on paper.
- Document key factual statements and follow-up evidence needed.
- Avoid promises about the likely accreditation outcome.

15. Sample Interview Questions

- Governance: How does the Board know whether the institution is meeting its mission and financial obligations?
- Academic quality: Show us an example of assessment results that led to a curriculum change.
- Student support: How does a student file a complaint, and how is the outcome documented?
- Finance: What assumptions drive the current budget and how are variances monitored?
- Technology: How is access to student records limited and how are backups tested?
- Continuous improvement: What is one institutional weakness identified during the past year and what changed because of it?

16. Virtual Review Practices

- Confirm the agenda, participants, links, and time zones in advance.
- Use secure platforms and avoid public recording unless authorized.
- Request screen demonstrations when necessary to verify LMS or administrative systems.
- Allow reasonable time for technical difficulties.
- Do not require unnecessary exposure of student-identifiable records.
- Document observations with the same care used for on-site review.

17. Site Review Practices

- Follow the approved agenda and scope.
- Observe facilities relevant to the institution without wandering into unrelated private areas.
- Verify that physical operations generally match representations in the record.
- Avoid accepting gifts or benefits that could impair independence.
- Treat employees and students professionally and respectfully.
- Raise urgent safety or integrity concerns promptly through GCTEQA channels.

18. Sampling

Reviewers may use reasonable sampling when the volume of records is large. Samples should be selected to test the relevant system, not to create a misleadingly favorable or unfavorable picture. When a sampled item reveals a material concern, reviewers may expand the sample or request additional evidence.

19. Handling Missing or Contradictory Evidence

- Identify exactly what is missing or inconsistent.
- Give the institution a reasonable opportunity to clarify within the authorized review process.
- Do not assume that absence of evidence always proves misconduct; determine whether the evidence is reasonably expected.
- Do not ignore contradictions that affect material findings.
- Document unresolved gaps clearly in the report.

20. Writing Findings

A strong finding should identify the criterion, summarize relevant evidence, state the compliance judgment, explain any gap, and describe the significance without inflammatory language.

Preferred structure
Criterion -> Evidence reviewed -> Finding -> Material gap (if any) -> Needed follow-up or recommendation.

21. Writing Tone and Professional Language

- Use objective, specific language.
- Avoid accusations unless the evidence supports a formal allegation and the process permits it.
- Avoid words such as fraudulent, deceptive, illegal, or unsafe unless the record and authorized review support that characterization.
- Separate fact from interpretation.
- Do not embarrass institutions or individuals in the written report.
- Use the institution's preferred identity and mission terminology where appropriate, while maintaining accurate standards language.

22. Strengths, Recommendations and Required Actions

Reviewers should distinguish among:

Strength

A practice that meaningfully supports quality or exceeds ordinary expectations.

Recommendation

Improvement advice that may strengthen the institution but is not itself a mandatory compliance action unless the decision body makes it one.

Required Action / Finding

A matter tied to noncompliance, monitoring, or evidence that must be addressed under the decision or policy.

23. Draft Evaluation Report

The lead reviewer ordinarily coordinates the draft report and ensures team findings are supported, non-duplicative, and internally consistent. A report may include:

- Institution and review scope
- Review dates and methods
- Review team
- Evidence summary
- Standard-by-standard findings
- Strengths and material concerns
- Requested clarifications or follow-up evidence
- Reviewer recommendation, when the applicable process calls for one
- Conflict/recusal disclosures relevant to the record

24. Factual Review by the Institution

Institutions may be given an opportunity to identify material factual errors and clarify the record before final adverse action. Reviewers should consider legitimate corrections without becoming defensive about draft wording. The goal is an accurate record, not protection of reviewer ego.

25. Reviewer Recommendation vs. Final Decision

The reviewer report may recommend an outcome when authorized, but the final accreditation decision belongs to the authorized GCTEQA decision body. Reviewers must not publicly announce, privately guarantee, or imply a final status before the official written decision is issued.

26. Interaction with the Decision Body

- Answer factual questions about evidence and review methods.
- Explain the basis for findings and material concerns.
- Disclose any change in conflict status.
- Do not lobby decision-makers for reasons unrelated to standards and evidence.
- Respect the decision body's independent authority to accept, modify, defer, or reject reviewer recommendations within policy.

27. Reviewer Conduct Prohibitions

- Soliciting business, donations, employment, or consulting from an institution under active review
- Promising or selling accreditation
- Using confidential information for personal or competitive advantage
- Discriminatory or harassing conduct
- Imposing personal religious or denominational beliefs as unpublished accreditation requirements
- Retaliating against an institution for raising a conflict or procedural concern
- Contacting students, regulators, media, or third parties outside the authorized review process without direction

28. Reporting Serious Concerns

If a reviewer encounters credible evidence of immediate student harm, threats, safeguarding concerns, material fraud, unlawful operation, serious data-security risk, or destruction of evidence, the reviewer should promptly escalate through GCTEQA leadership or the designated ethics/compliance channel rather than independently attempting to investigate beyond the assignment.

29. Reviewer Performance and Feedback

- Timeliness and preparedness
- Accuracy and evidence discipline
- Consistency in applying standards
- Interview professionalism
- Report quality and clarity
- Conflict disclosure and confidentiality
- Team collaboration

- Respect for institutional diversity
- Responsiveness to calibration and feedback

GCTEQA may coach, retrain, suspend, or discontinue reviewer assignments when performance or conduct does not meet expectations.

30. Reviewer Records and Retention

Reviewer notes, drafts, conflict forms, final findings, and review communications are GCTEQA records when created within the accreditation process. Reviewers should follow GCTEQA instructions for storage, return, deletion, and retention and should not maintain private archives of confidential institutional evidence.

31. Closing Reviewer Standard

The question is not: "Would I run this institution this way?"

The question is: Does the institution, within its lawful mission and approved scope, demonstrate compliance with the applicable GCTEQA standards through sufficient and credible evidence?

APPENDIX A - PRE-REVIEWER ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

[ ] Assignment and scope received

[ ] Reviewer qualifications appropriate to assignment

[ ] Conflict disclosure completed

[ ] No disqualifying conflict identified

[ ] Confidentiality obligations acknowledged

[ ] Standards and evidence reviewed

[ ] Questions prepared

[ ] Team roles clarified

[ ] Virtual/site logistics confirmed

[ ] Secure access to evidence confirmed

Reviewer Name: _____

Institution: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX B - STANDARD FINDING WORKSHEET

Institution: _____

Standard / Criterion: _____

Reviewer: _____

Date: _____

Evidence Reviewed

_____

_____

_____

_____

Finding

[ ] Met

[ ] Partially Met

[ ] Not Met

[ ] Not Applicable

Basis for Finding

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Additional Evidence / Follow-Up Needed

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW NOTES TEMPLATE

Institution: _____

Interview Group / Person: _____

Reviewer(s): _____

Date / Time: _____

Standards / Issues to Clarify

_____

_____

_____

Key Questions

_____

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Key Factual Responses / Evidence References

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_____

Follow-Up Needed

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX D - REVIEWER FINAL ATTESTATION

[ ] I disclosed all relevant conflicts and followed any required recusal.

[ ] I evaluated the institution against applicable GCTEQA standards and evidence.

[ ] I did not promise, guarantee, sell, or prejudge accreditation.

[ ] I did not impose personal religious, denominational, political, commercial, or other irrelevant preferences as accreditation requirements.

[ ] My written findings accurately reflect the evidence and my professional judgment.

[ ] I preserved confidentiality and will handle review records according to GCTEQA instructions.

Reviewer Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Closing Statement

Credible accreditation depends on reviewers who are prepared, independent, respectful, evidence-focused, and willing to document both strengths and deficiencies. Reviewer professionalism protects institutions, learners, GCTEQA, and the public trust.

EVIDENCE. FAIRNESS. INDEPENDENCE. PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT.

Diverse Traditions. Shared Standards. Global Excellence.

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