

## Stakeholder Communications: New CMTCA Virtual Site Visit Policy

### Overview

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, CMTCA began offering virtual accreditation site visits in January 2021. Prior to doing so, CMTCA consulted extensively about feasibility and best practices with other education accreditors, as a member of the Association of Accrediting Agencies of Canada.

To date, six virtual site visits have been conducted by CMTCA at programs in both British Columbia and Ontario. Qualitative and quantitative feedback was gathered and analyzed from education program participants, surveyors and CMTCA staff. This feedback informed the recent decision by the Board of CMTCA to continue offering the option of virtual site visits to programs. The CMTCA Virtual Site Visit Policy can be found on the CMTCA website. The virtual format has some limitations, however, and as a result a limit was placed on the maximum accreditation decision possible following a virtual visit. These limitations are:

1. The accreditation decision following a virtual site visit will be limited to a three-year accreditation. Five-year accreditation will not be available following a virtual site visit.
2. Virtual visits will be offered only for every second accreditation visit. Programs may not complete two consecutive site visits virtually.
3. Following a non-accredited decision, the subsequent site visit must be completed in-person and may not be completed virtually.

It was noted by the Board that this policy may require revision over time, as the evaluative data regarding virtual visits was limited. For example, at this time, only surveyors and staff were able to provide comparative feedback regarding the differences between an on-site and virtual site visit. This is because all programs that completed virtual site visits were experiencing a CMTCA site visit for the first time. CMTCA will continue to gather feedback in this area to inform future decision-making regarding the virtual review process and availability.

### What are the limitations to virtual site visits?

Although virtual visits offer education programs a more affordable way to determine their accreditation status, they do have limitations. CMTCA uses the tracer method to assess a program's compliance with the accreditation standards. This method is a highly effective way to evaluate all aspects of an education program, and is in use by many major accrediting bodies in Canada and the U.S.



How does the tracer method work? The Survey team “traces” compliance with each criterion in the standards by conducting a full 360 review including having many conversations with as many people as possible in the education program including faculty/staff, students, and clients/patients. If they encounter any conflicting information, they initiate further discussions, until they can clearly assess whether the criterion is in place. As you can imagine, “tracing” can require many spontaneous conversations, and sometimes involves speaking with the same people more than once! Ongoing access to as many people as possible at every level of the organization during the two days of the in-person visit allows for a thorough collection of information. It also allows the survey team to see policies and procedures in action and in place where they are needed and used.

There are a few significant issues in completing the tracer method by videoconference:

- It is logistically difficult to arrange the conversations required for the tracer method, especially spontaneous follow-up conversations, via videoconferencing.
- Internet reliability, videoconferencing glitches, and bandwidth limitations often impact the quality and quantity of meeting time.
- Technology can be a barrier to truly observing the program in action and getting a true sense of the program facilities.
- Most important, the virtual environment can limit the Surveyor’s ability to establish the rapport needed for frank, in-depth conversations.

To overcome some of the logistical obstacles, CMTCA extends virtual site visits to three days (instead of the usual two days on-site). CMTCA allocates an additional staff member to assist with coordinating meetings and conversations. However, technical problems and the limitations of the virtual environment cannot be avoided. For this reason, CMTCA’s policy will ensure that programs are observed in person at regular intervals, by placing limits on the length of decision after a virtual review, and by not permitting consecutive virtual reviews.

## What was considered in determining the fee for virtual site visits

The virtual site visit fee considers administrative costs including staff time and surveyor honoraria. For 2021 and 2022, the virtual site visit fee is \$5,900, and will always be posted in the Fee Schedule on the CMTCA website. The fee for an in-person site visit also includes travel and accommodations, so it is generally higher.

## What differences should an education program expect when choosing a virtual site visit?

- You will be asked to submit a number of documents two weeks prior to the virtual visit, evidence surveyors would normally have reviewed while on site.
- It is helpful if you set expectations for those who will be meeting with surveyors, so that they know that they may be invited to several different conversations with the survey team. For example, a student might expect to attend one conversation about curriculum, and a separate conversation about facilities, or about student services. Participants will receive virtual meeting invitations prior to the site visit but may be invited to additional conversations during the visit (keep an eye on your inbox!).

- Your survey team will include an extra CMTCA staff member to ensure things run smoothly (so two surveyors and two staff)
- Education programs will need to assist CMTCA staff to coordinate virtual visit meetings and to encourage attendance at the meetings.
- Meeting times for virtual visit may require reasonable compromise between the time zone of the program, and that of the Survey team.
- The education program will prepare and present an informal introduction to their program to begin the virtual site visit, which orients the Survey team to the program and campus facilities.
- An education program may be eligible for a one or three-year accreditation award after the virtual site visit (but a five-year decision will not be awarded, regardless of score).
- Following the virtual visit, the accreditation decision report will indicate that the review was completed virtually, but accreditation certificates and seals will not make this distinction.