

# Quality assurance and accreditation in open and distance education

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Keywords	Abstract
Distance Education, Quality Assurance and Accreditation, Open and Distance Education, Accreditation	In the 21st century, rapid developments and changes in the field of information and technology lead the society to change in every field. In this period, which can be called the digital era, it seems essential for societies to improve themselves. It is thought that the most important factor in the development and change of societies is education. The Ministry of National Education (MEB) and the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) are responsible for the development of education systems in our country. Quality Assurance and Accreditation systems have been used in higher education in order to keep up with the modern-day education. In this context, institutions have been established in order to provide quality assurance and accreditation in higher education in Europe and in our country within the scope of the Bologna process. In addition, in line with today's developing technology, increasing number of students, increasing interest in education and learning independent of time and place, the accreditation processes of distance education and distance education programs are gaining in importance. The aim of the study is to evaluate the reflections of quality assurance and accreditation studies in higher education institutions in Turkey on distance education in the axis of the determined questions. As a result of the study, it is concluded that open and distance education institutions should have certain quality standards and ensure this by accreditation. In addition, a table was created showing the aims and benefits of quality assurance and accreditation practices in distance education.

## 1. Introduction

Today, rapid developments in science and technology are changing the structure of society; As a result of this, changes occur in the objectives, methods and techniques of education (Dilci, 2012). Developing technology and science bring about change in many areas such as economic, social, cultural and technical in society, and it is thought that societies that cannot adapt to change have difficulty in catching up with the age. The most important factor in social change is the education factor. In this context, it can be said that the education system has a duty to keep the society ready for the transformation by keeping up with technology and science. If the education system can successfully fulfill the task it has undertaken, it will be much easier to make this change process applicable (Bakioğlu & Ülker, 2015).

The structuring and shaping of education systems in our country is carried out in cooperation with the Ministry of National Education (MEB) and the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) (Şişman, 2005). It is thought that the Council of Higher Education has to produce some solutions in order to catch up with and keep up with the education level required by the age. In this context, quality assurance systems and accreditation concepts are starting to come into play (Bakioğlu, 2009). In the study, the subject of "quality assurance and accreditation", which has been frequently studied in higher education in Turkey in recent years, should also be addressed in terms of open and distance education in the light of developments in Turkey and the world. Because the demand for open and distance

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education continues to increase all over the world. The reasons for this are; The increase in the demand for higher education in parallel with the increasing population, the inadequacy of formal education institutions to meet this demand, the active use of technology in educational environments with the development of technology, the availability of flexible learning environments and the spread of online learning environments (Özen, 2021). In addition, the current Covid-19 pandemic plays an important role in increasing this demand. In this context, it is important to evaluate the reflections of quality assurance and accreditation studies on open and distance education in the axis of the following questions.

1. What are the Objectives of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Open and Distance Education?
2. What are the Benefits of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Open and Distance Education?

## 2. Literature

### 2.1. Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education : Activities, Definitions and Research

The Higher Education Quality Board has been established in order to make evaluations according to national and international quality standards regarding the quality levels of education and research activities and administrative services of higher education institutions in Turkey, to carry out internal and external quality assurance, accreditation processes and authorization of independent external evaluation institutions (YÖKAK, 2017).

Higher Education Quality Board; It was established within the scope of the "Higher Education Quality Assurance Regulation" published in the Official Gazette dated 23 July 2015 and numbered 29423, and later with the Law No. It has been rearranged in accordance with the provisions of Additional Article 35 added to the Law.

The main duties of the Higher Education Quality Board are as follows;

- To make external evaluation of higher education institutions,
- To carry out the processes of authorization and recognition of accreditation bodies, and
- To ensure the internalization and dissemination of quality assurance culture in higher education institutions (YÖKAK, 2017).

Quality assurance systems and accreditation activities in Europe are at the stage of formation and development, as in Turkey.

The European University Association (EUA) insists on a formal accreditation process at European level. On the other hand, the European Accreditation Consortium (The European consortium for Accreditation :ECA). The European Accreditation Consortium defines accreditation as: "It is a formal and independent decision showing that a higher education institution or higher education program has certain standards."(ENQA, 2000; Aktan, 2007)

European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (The European Network for quality Assurance (ENQA) aims to bring together national quality assurance agencies and to share knowledge and experience among them. However, it is not yet able to transfer the results of national evaluations to the international arena. ( Kohler, 2003; Aktan, 2007)

Quality and quality assurance systems work as a whole and are closely related to the concept of accreditation. Accreditation is defined as an evaluation method that aims the official approval of a program, institution or organization by a group of experts in line with predetermined quality criteria (Bakioğlu&Ülker, 2015; Prime Ministry, 1997). The success of accreditation systems varies depending on the quality of the resources allocated to higher education and the inputs to the process (Turan, 2013).

Quality assurance is the continuous evaluation of a higher education institution or program according to predetermined criteria (UNESCO-CEPES, 2004) and is basically carried out with the aim of providing quality education for the institution or program. One of the methods used to ensure quality assurance is accreditation . Accreditation is the evaluation of an institution or program in terms of compliance with predetermined standards ( Oakes , 1999). According to another definition, accreditation is the process of confirming the quality of the institution through a continuous evaluation (CRE, 2001). CHEA (2000) defines accreditation as an external evaluation process for the improvement of quality in higher education programs and universities.

Quality and accreditation systems have a structure that is processed depending on certain standards. According to Aktan and Gencel (2007), the standards to be found in accreditation studies are; standards for the student, the aims of education and training, program outcomes and evaluation, quality of teaching staff, infrastructure, institutional support and financial resources, and program criteria.

Accreditation in higher education; Aiming to demonstrate that a higher education institution or any program implemented by a higher education institution has certain performance standards (quality, efficiency, effectiveness, etc.) at national and/or international level, thus establishing trust in the eyes of those who demand higher education and also the public. It is a system to do. Accreditation is a voluntary quality assurance process that allows both the periodic self-evaluation of the higher education institution (institutional self-evaluation) and the periodic evaluation of the higher education institution by external independent accreditation agencies. In other words, accreditation in higher education is a tool for improving academic quality, transparency and accountability. (Atwell, 1993; Blauch , 1969; Dickey & Miller, 1972; Harclerod , 1980; Hogg,1994; Ruben,1995; Selden, 1960)

Many studies have been carried out in the field of quality assurance systems and accreditation in higher education. First of all, accreditation procedures were carried out in the engineering departments (two departments) of the Middle East Technical University in 1994, and the curricula were tried to be accredited. It is seen that the studies in the field of quality and accreditation in our country are mostly done on teacher training programs and teacher qualifications. In this context, the first concrete step taken by YÖK is the accreditation process for teacher training programs, which was initiated in 1996. In this process, YÖK has adopted the training and education of students as the main purpose in all activities related to accreditation procedures, and stated that it is among the most basic duties of universities (Yılmaz, 2016).

Determination and research studies were carried out in 1997 by YÖK in coordination with the UK Representation in Turkey in order to develop quality systems in universities in our country. The main purpose of the study is to bring academic success and quality standards to the next level. In this context, pilot applications were made in 13 departments in 8 universities selected from Turkey, and the project was introduced with a seminar organized by YÖK in Ankara in 1998 and the implementation was terminated (Yılmaz, 2016).

The purpose of accreditation systems is considered as qualified learning outcomes and generally focuses on the inputs of the process (student, lecturer, physical infrastructure, etc.). Studies in the field of quality and accreditation in higher education started to increase gradually in our country with the Bologna process that started in 1999, and it was seen that there was an increase in the studies carried out. According to the study titled "Standards and Accreditation in Teacher Education in Turkey" (YÖK, 1999) conducted within the scope of YÖK/WORLD BANK National Education Development Project in 1999, the Turkish accreditation system to be used in teacher education was designed and put into operation.

The turning point of the quality and accreditation process in higher education in Turkey started in 1999. In our country, developments in the field of quality and accreditation in higher education and the process of enactment gained momentum with Turkey's inclusion in the Bologna process in 1999 ( Kondakçı , 2003).

Within the scope of the Bologna process, the accreditation law was enacted by the Turkish Grand National Assembly in order to establish the necessary infrastructure and accredit higher education programs. Within the framework of this law, a wide-ranging study was carried out on "Standards and Accreditation in Teacher Education in Turkey" by the National Education Development Project Consultants and Accreditation Working Group in cooperation with YÖK/DÜNYA Bank in 1999. With this study, accreditation programs, standards for teacher education, indicator evidence and rating systems, accreditation training programs and basic principles for teacher qualifications were determined (YÖK, 1999; Akduman, Özkale , &Ekinci, 2001).

In addition to these studies, many theses and articles have been written in our country, and it is seen that studies are mostly carried out on curricula, the structure of education faculties, teacher training systems, vocational education, accreditation in higher education and the Bologna process. Some of these studies are included:

Aktan and Gencel (2007), in their study called accreditation in higher education, examined the aims, characteristics, benefits of accreditation and the general functioning of accreditation processes. As a result, they have determined certain accreditation process standards, namely standards for the student, the aims of education and training, program outcomes and evaluation, the quality of teaching staff, infrastructure, institutional support and financial resources, and program criteria.

Erişen (2001), examined the determination of quality standards for teacher training programs and the evaluation of faculties' compliance with the standards. Vocational and technical education faculties were preferred in the research. He determined the quality standards with the help of a scale used in the study.

Adıgüzel (2008), in his study titled "The Level of Realization of Teacher Education Program Standards in Education Faculties", stated at what level the teacher education standards are realized in education faculties in the results he obtained by using the instructors.

Turan (2013), in his study titled 'Identification of Quality Standards for Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge Teacher Training Programs', developed a scale of 80 items consisting of 15 different dimensions and two main parts and determined the quality standards.

## 2.2. Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Open and Distance Education

Open and distance education; It can be defined as an education system in which learners learn through existing communication and information technologies independently of time, place and each other, providing learners with flexible learning environments, and offering equal opportunities and opportunities to learners.

Quality assurance and accreditation are among the top issues on the agenda of higher education in the world, not only in formal education, but also in the field of open and distance learning (YÖK, 2004). Due to international student mobility, cross-border universities and the free movement of services in the globalizing world, recognition of diplomas, quality assurance and accreditation practices in Open and Distance Education have become one of the important agenda items in bilateral or multilateral relations between countries (YÖK, 2007). Parallel to these developments, the rapid increase in the number of Distance Education institutions and the number of students studying in these institutions has led to concerns about quality ( Belawati , 2010; Thorpe , 2003).

Daniel (2006) states that with the spread of open and distance learning applications both at the national level and across borders, the quality in Open and Distance Learning programs has become more important than ever.

Demirel (2016), in his study titled "Accreditation of Distance Learning", evaluates how accreditation standards can be applied for distance education programs and which areas are used from accreditation standards. The study builds on research to define the current accreditation system for distance education, including identifying problem areas, and continues to produce proposals to facilitate the implementation of accreditation for such systems. The results of this study conclude that training providers can lead to establishing an accredited distance learning system and reassuring people about the quality of their work.

Koçdar (2011) talked about the importance of establishing and developing quality assurance and accreditation systems in the field of open and distance learning and aimed to develop a model proposal for Turkey by holding a focus group meeting. .

When the practices related to the accreditation of Open and Distance Learning institutions and programs are examined, it is seen that Open and Distance Learning institutions and programs are accredited within the accreditation bodies in face-to-face education in many countries; Within this structure, it is seen that some organizations use different methods when evaluating Open and Distance Learning, while some organizations accredit Open and Distance Learning practices in the same way as face-to-face education (Swedish national Agency for high Education , 2008; Jung and Latchem , 2012).

In addition to these applications, there are accreditation bodies operating only for the accreditation of open and distance learning institutions or programs in a few countries (USA, India, England, Australia). In Turkey, AUDAK (Open and Distance Education Programs Evaluation and Accreditation Association) started its activities in 2017 in order to inform the institutions providing open and distance education, primarily in the field of higher education, on management and organization issues, to evaluate the relevant programs of the institution or institution, and to carry out accreditation studies. AUDAK, 2017). In this context, since the national context and the purpose of establishment of the accreditation mechanism are important in the establishment of accreditation systems, the characteristics of these systems differ according to the culture, infrastructure and education system of the country in which they are located (Jung et al., 2011).

In parallel with the trends in the world, the number of Open and Distance Learning programs has been increasing rapidly in Turkey since the beginning of the 2000s. On the other hand, there is no evaluation and accreditation

process for Open and Distance Learning programs in Turkey; only new programs to be opened are evaluated by the Distance Education Committee operating under the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), and as a result of this evaluation, a decision is made on whether to open the programs or not (Özkul and Latchem , 2011).

Latchem , Özkul, Aydın and Mutlu (2006) state that there is a need for a quality assurance system in Open and Distance Learning applications in Turkey and that quality assurance should be given priority. The rapid increase in the number of programs increases the need for an objective method on quality assurance and accreditation in Turkey. Turkey's inclusion in the European Higher Education Area created within the scope of the Bologna Process in Europe requires the establishment and dissemination of quality assurance and accreditation systems ( Koçdar and Aydın, 2011)

### 3. Methodology

This study is narrative review of selected articles on quality, quality assurance and accreditation in open and distance educational context. Narrative literature review articles are publications that describe and discuss the state of the science of a specific topic or theme from a theoretical and contextual point of view. These types of review articles do not list the types of databases and methodological approaches used to conduct the review nor the evaluation criteria for inclusion of retrieved articles during databases search (Bernardo et al. 2007). Narrative review consists of critical analysis of the literature published in books and electronic or paper-based journal articles. Narrative literature review articles have an important role in continuing education because they provide readers with up-to-date knowledge about a specific topic or theme. However, this type of review does not describe the methodological approach that would permit reproduction of data nor answer to specific quantitative research questions. These review articles normally use a qualitative approach using the following headings: Introduction, Development (using necessary sub-headings to divide and discuss appropriately the topic), Discussion, and References (Ferrari, 2015).

### 4. Conclusion, Discussion and Suggestion

Quality assurance and accreditation in higher education can be defined as the whole of the processes that reveal that any program implemented within the institution or institution has certain standards and to what extent it is in compliance with these standards by the evaluation institutions. As a result of this study, a table was created about the aims and benefits of quality assurance and accreditation in the field of distance education.

**Table 1: Aims and Benefits of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Open and Distance Education** (Bakioğlu and Ülker, 2015; Koçdar , 2011; Daniel, 2006; Demirel, 2016; YÖK, 2007)

Objectives of Quality Assurance and Accreditation	Benefits of Quality Assurance and Accreditation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To ensure quality in distance education programs,</li> <li>• To ensure that distance education programs and practices are qualified,</li> <li>• To provide the standards for the graduates of Distance Education institutions and programs to enter business life</li> <li>• To enable Open and Distance Education institutions in the world to know each other and to accept mutual student exchange,</li> <li>• To ensure the validity and comparability of diplomas of Distance Education graduates everywhere,</li> <li>• To create a framework about the program's features, program outputs, advantages and disadvantages of the program for learners who want to enroll in Distance Education Programs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stakeholders have information about which standards the institution or program provides and to what extent.</li> <li>• While choosing personnel, employers can have information about the qualifications of the candidates from institutions and programs.</li> <li>• Accreditation of Distance Education Institutions by a reputable institution can increase the popularity of the institution and also improve cooperation with other institutions.</li> <li>• It can provide an opportunity for stakeholders to offer solutions to the problems they experience and increase internal communication.</li> <li>• It can provide distance education institutions the opportunity to make plans for the future.</li> <li>• It can help managers determine the vision and mission of the institution or program.</li> <li>• It can enable the establishment of programs by making consistent and comprehensive applications in the institution.</li> </ul>

As a result, it is thought and recommended that open and distance education institutions should have certain quality standards and ensure that they are accredited. It is foreseen that the accreditation system for a quality higher education and distance higher education will provide serious benefits. In this way, it is thought that the national and international recognition of the institution or program will increase, and it will be the priority institutions preferred by learners and lecturers and other stakeholders.

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