Chapter 2

Cultural Diversity and Accreditation:
A Shared Understanding of Quality

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of distance education in higher education world-wide has brought forth the issue of quality assurance and evaluation processes for institutions and programmes. Though quality is a perception about the performance in products and services offered, it is expected to be shaped through mutual consent in the eyes of internal and external stakeholders of the institutions. Despite the different needs, social contexts and cultures of higher education institutions, general standards have been developed to guide distance education providers in their quest. This paper concentrates on external evaluation pillar of quality assurance that is accreditation according to American, European and Asian perspectives and tries to explain the shared understanding about quality in higher education in the face of cultural diversity. A case-study, the quality journey of Anadolu University, Open Education System is described as an example of different ways leading to the same target.

INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism is an important dimension for evaluating distance learning spaces since cultural factors influence the programs in many respects such as the course design and media for interaction and collaboration during teaching and learning processes. They also shape the administrative tools and strategic decisions based on priorities of the higher education institutions (HEIs). The administration of distance programs is closely related with the institutional culture that emanates from the socioeconomic

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characteristics of the country in question. The strategies and policies of the institutions are shaped by
the norms and values of their country of origin. The picture gets even more complex when it comes to
the evaluation of distance programs and their review by international accrediting bodies. The Western
pedagogic influence on shaping the core dimensions of quality can easily be seen on the criteria used
by regional and national authorities in different geographies. However it is still up to the institutions
to decide for their point of reference in establishing their inner quality assurance systems. The amount
of penetration of the quality culture to all units in an institution is closely related with the policies of
the senior management. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the effects of cultural factors in an
environment where the institutions and programs are evaluated and accredited by external reviewers
according to international quality standards. For this purpose the standards developed for Open and
Distance Learning (ODL) by globally recognized institutions namely, Distance Education Accrediting
Commission (DEAC) of the USA; E-xcellence Quality Label standards of the European Association of
Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), Quality Frameworks of International Council for Open and
Distance Education (ICDE) and Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) are compared with
an eye on cultural factors and needs of HEIs from different countries. ICDE serves as a global organi-
zation that has ties with UNESCO and brings different perspectives and values together in its attempts
for developing quality standards through collaboration and benchmarking. As a case-study to shed light
on different preferences and roadmaps to quality assurance; the national quality framework of Turkish
higher education, its main references and the quality assurance experience for the distance education
system at Anadolu University Open Education System are concentrated on.

STANDARDS FOR ACCREDITATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In his report titled “The State of Open Universities in the Commonwealth: A Perspective on Performance,
Competition and Innovation” published by COL (Commonwealth of Learning), Richard Garrett asks an
important question: “What should we use to define success?” and “what the institutions are willing and
able to disclose?” Quality assurance (QA) outcomes in higher education, including accreditation is an
important pillar of public-facing and a tool for defining success (2016, p. 19).

In its historical development, the first trend for quality assurance processes in post-secondary edu-
cation was to focus on quality of inputs such as scores of incoming students, entrance requirements,
qualifications of the faculty; however the new consensus is to focus on learning outcomes and paying
more attention to the processes of teaching, learning and assessment. Today quality assurance agencies
are working with standards to judge students’ learning outcomes (Daniel, 2016). In general, accreditation
criteria refer to “student outcomes, curriculum, courses and courseware, teaching and learning processes,
student and faculty support services, assessment, evaluation and internal QA systems, management, staff,
resourcing, returns on investment and benefits to the economy and society” (Latchem, 2014, p. 314).

An indicator for growing interest in external evaluation and accreditation may be the evolution of the
International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and its growing
membership since 1991 (Lewis, 2016). Today the association has 280 members around the world with
the objective of developing the theory and practice of quality assurance in higher education through the
collaboration of an international community of quality agencies. QA is an embracing term that covers
all policies, processes and actions to maintain and develop the quality of an higher education institution.
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