

ACCREDITATION OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A Framework for Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to develop a framework for the accreditation of higher open and distance learning (ODL) programs in Turkey. The study was designed as a sequential monomethod multistrand mixed model including two strands which were both qualitative (QUAL→QUAL). In the first strand, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through a three-round Delphi study with an expert panel consisting of 28 experts. In the second strand, qualitative data were collected via focus group interview. Based on a comprehensive literature review and the findings from the study, a framework was proposed including an initial accreditation process for new ODL programs and a re-accreditation process for ongoing programs. In addition, 35 criteria for new programs and 42 criteria for ongoing programs were developed to be used in the accreditation process.

Keywords: Accreditation in open and distance learning, Delphi technique, focus group interview

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, quality assurance (QA) and accreditation in open and distance learning (ODL) have been among the top issues in the higher education agenda in the world (Higher Education Council [HEC], 2004). Chalmers and Johnston (2012, p.3) define accreditation as "a process of external quality review by an accreditation or certification body which enables an institution, program or course of study to be recognized or certified as meeting certain required standards." As it certifies the quality of an institution and/or its programs against a set of pre-determined standards, it is closely linked to quality assurance (Kilfoil, 2007).

In each country, the purpose of establishing an accreditation system may vary according to the societal and cultural environments and national context (Jung et al., 2011; Stella, 2007). Whatever the purpose is, the primary goal of accreditation is to enhance quality and ensure quality assurance (Eaton, 2008).

Due to international student mobility, emergence of cross-border universities and mobility of services in a globalized economy, accreditation practices have become one of the major issues in bilateral or multilateral relations of nations in the world (HEC, 2007). In parallel with these developments, fast growth in the number of ODL institutions and student enrollments have caused some concerns regarding the quality of programs delivered by these institutions (Belawati, 2010; Thorpe, 2003).

Daniel (2006) states that with the phenomenal proliferation of national and cross-border ODL across the world, quality matters more than ever. Yet, how to evaluate ODL within QA and accreditation practices is a controversial issue (Stella & Granam, 2004; Welch & Glennie, 2005). Some researchers argue that quality of ODL should be judged by the same methodologies and criteria as face-to-face provision (Jung & Latchem, 2012; Stella & Granam, 2004).

On the other hand, some researchers claim that ODL requires a different pedagogy and instructional design approach and many of the measures used in traditional accreditation reviews do not apply to ODL institutions or programmes; so, different measures and specific criteria should be used to evaluate ODL practices (Jung & Latchem, 2012; Kilfoil, 2007; Loane, 2001; Olcott, 2003; Stella & Granam, 2004; Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2008; Thorpe, 2003). Parallel to these arguments, QA and accreditation practices vary in each country. In most of the countries in the world, it can be observed that ODL is mostly accredited within the body of traditional accreditation agencies. In some of these agencies ODL is accredited in the same way as traditional education (For instance, agencies in Australia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, Thailand, Japan, Korea, Netherlands, Finland and Denmark) whereas in some other ones (For instance, agencies in Romania, Austria and Indonesia) it is accredited by using different methods and criteria (Jung & Latchem, 2007; Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2008). In addition to these, in some of the countries there are accrediting agencies which solely accredit ODL programs and institutions. For instance, Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) in the United States, Distance Education Council (DEC) in India and Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODL QC) in the United Kingdom are such kind of agencies (DEC Handbook, 2009; DETC, 2009; Kilfoil, 2007). In sum, quality assurance and accreditation in ODL is still at an early stage of development (Jung, Wong, Baigaltugs, & Belawati, 2011).

In the QA and accreditation process, different sets of standards or criteria can be used by the accreditation agencies. However, they concentrate on a number of common aspects and all educational QA guidelines stress the importance of policy and planning, human resources, programs, learning media, student support and student assessment (Belawati, 2010; Middlehurst, 2003). Although the criteria used for ODL in the accreditation process have common features with other types of learning, there are also differences (Belawati, 2010). Jung and Latchem (2007) state that ODL institutional QA procedures typically cover planning, management and administration, course design, development and delivery, learner support, assessment and technology applications and they often apply strict criteria to instructional design in particular. Hall (2003) indicates that guidelines feature three broad principles; these are curriculum, student support, assessment and evaluation.

For instance, the guideline *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs (2001)* created by the 8 US regional accreditation commissions includes 5 components: *Institutional context and commitment, curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, evaluation and assessment.*

For the E-xcellence label of European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), 6 criteria were created (EADTU, 2009). These are *strategic management, curriculum design, course design, course delivery, staff support and student support.*

In the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK, additional criteria are integrated into the existing criteria for flexible and distributed learning under the headings of *delivery, support* and *assessment* (QAA, 2004). Norwegian Association for Distance Education's (NADE) criteria are divided into *prerequisites, implementation, results* and *follow-up*. These phases are further divided into *information and counseling, course development, education and organization* (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2008).

In Turkey, not only in ODL but also in face-to-face education, implementation of a nation-wide QA and accreditation system is still a work in progress (Ozkul & Latchem, 2011). Currently, there is an *approval* mechanism for all the programs and the decision to start a program is made by the Higher Education Council (HEC) including ODL. A few program accreditation agencies have been established in the fields of engineering, psychology, science and literature for face-to-face education since 2005. In Turkey, currently more than 60 universities offer ODL programs (A.E. Ozkul, personal communication, September 23, 2011). Ozkul and Latchem (2011) indicate that in Turkey the emphasis has been on access, equity and capacity building rather than assuring quality in the products and processes in ODL. Latchem, Ozkul, Aydin, and Mutlu (2006) point out the necessity of quality assurance in Turkish ODL.

Moreover, Turkey is one of the countries participating in the Bologna Process, which has an objective of creating a QA and accreditation system throughout Europe. So, it has been inevitable to establish an accreditation system in Turkish higher education.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to develop a framework for the accreditation of higher ODL programs within an accreditation system in Turkey. Accreditation is about both QA and quality improvement (Eaton, 2008). In the literature, it is observed that the terms *accreditation* and *quality assurance* are being used interchangeably.

Thus, although the purpose is to develop a framework for the accreditation of ODL programs, also the term QA is used in some parts of the study. Research questions for this study are as follows:

- How should be the appropriate accreditation process for new and ongoing ODL programs in Turkey?
- Which standards/criteria should be used while evaluating new and ongoing ODL programs in the accreditation process?

RESEARCH METHOD

The study was designed as a sequential monomethod multistrand mixed model including two strands which were both qualitative (QUAL→QUAL). Creswell (2008, p.510) defines mixed method research design as "a procedure for collecting, analyzing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to understand a research problem." In sequential mixed designs, at least 2 strands occur chronologically and the strands are in relation with each other (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

In other words, the conclusions derived from the first strand constitute a basis for the formulation of design components for the next strand.

First Strand

In the first strand of the study, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through a three-round Delphi study in order to identify the criteria that should be used in the accreditation process. Linstone & Turoff (2002, p.3) define Delphi as "a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem." Although the first applications of Delphi aimed to predict future, it changed in time and it began to be used in modified forms for various reasons such as planning, decision-making, problem-solving and evaluation (Delbecq, Van de Ven & Gustafson, 1975; Keeney, Hasson, & McKenna, 2001).

It is a suitable method when there is incomplete knowledge about a problem or phenomenon (Garrod & Fyall, 2005; Hung, Altschuld, & Lee, 2008; Skulmoski, Hartman, & Krahn, 2007; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Keeney et al. (2001) state that Delphi method is based on applying a number of questionnaires iteratively; but unlike questionnaires, the Delphi aims to achieve consensus of opinion, judgment or choice. This is achieved through a series of rounds where statistical information about the given answers is fed back to participants using questionnaires. According to Rowe and Wright (1999), four key features may be regarded as necessary for defining a procedure as a *Delphi*. These are: anonymity of the participants, iteration of the questionnaires, controlled feedback, and the statistical aggregation of group response. Anonymity provides each participant to express his/her idea independently without being under group pressure (Hung et al., 2008; Westbrook, 1997).

With the iteration of the questionnaire over a number of rounds, participants have the opportunity to change their opinions and judgments (Hung et al., 2008; Rowe & Wright, 1999). Feedback mostly includes statistical information including aggregated group response (Mullen, 2003) and enables experts to review their responses in the context of the responses of other participants.

In addition to these, Delphi enables participants, who are called as *panelists*, to participate asynchronously in the group communication process so that they can reflect on their answers (Delbecq et al., 1975; Keeney et al., 2001). It is a useful technique for collecting opinions from geographically dispersed experts who cannot meet face-to-face (Delbecq et al., 1975; Hung et al., 2008; Linstone & Turoff, 2002). Questionnaires can be sent to the participants via fax, post, e-mail (Gordon, 1994) or they can be applied through online questionnaire software programs.

Accreditation of ODL programs is a relatively new issue in Turkey, so it was intended to benefit from the experiences of various academicians studying in the fields of ODL and/or accreditation. As they were geographically dispersed from each other and not able to meet face-to-face because of time and cost limitations, Delphi was considered to be the most suitable technique for collecting the data regarding the accreditation criteria in the study. Firstly, literature was reviewed in order to define the dimensions of the study and determine the characteristics of the participants. Based on the literature review, an open-ended question was prepared for the first round. Then, the expert panel was formed.

Selection of Panelists

Delphi panelists are selected according to their *subject matter expertise* so that they can contribute to the topic (Hatcher & Colton, 2007). Since expert opinion is sought, a purposive sampling method is used in Delphi (Sahin, 2010; Skulmoski et al., 2007; Franklin & Hart, 2006). Also snowball sampling is commonly used (Skulmoski et al., 2007). There is no agreement regarding the size of the panel and in the Delphi literature it is indicated that panel size varies from a few to hundreds of experts (Grisham, 2008; Hatcher & Colton, 2007; Sahin, 2001; Skulmoski et al., 2007; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005; Williams & Webb, 1994). According to Delbecq et al. (1975), with a homogenous group of people, 10 to 15 participants might be enough. They indicate that few new ideas are generated within a homogenous group once the size exceeds 30 well-chosen participants. In this regard, in the study, Delphi panel consisted of 28 Turkish academicians who were experts at accreditation/quality assurance and/or ODL from 17 different universities in Turkey. They were selected through purposive and snowball sampling method.

Delphi Process

Three rounds occurred in the Delphi study. In Delphis, rounds are repeated until the consensus is achieved; however, three rounds of iterations are commonly viewed as sufficient for consensus (Delbecq et al., 1975; Hung, Altschuld & Lee, 2008; Linstone & Turoff, 2002). Thus, the study was stopped on the third round. The whole Delphi process was completed approximately in 9 months.

First Round

First round questionnaire usually consists of open-ended questions (Delbecq et al., 1975; Franklin & Hart, 2007). Therefore, a questionnaire composing of an open-ended question was sent to the panelists via e-mail and 16 experts responded to the questions in the first round. Responses given to the open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively by grouping and transforming them into *question forms* that could be asked as quality criteria in the accreditation process under six main elements: *Management, Organization and Planning, Program and Course Design, Learners and Support Services, Staff and Support Services, Assessment and Learning Outcomes, and Evaluation*. In order to provide reliability, another researcher coded the data and intercoder reliability was calculated as 93 % with the formulation suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Second Round

The second and subsequent rounds consist of the questionnaires that usually include quantitative rating or ranking techniques and require quantitative analysis (Powell, 2003). For the second round, after evaluating the responses given in the first round, a questionnaire was developed consisting of 95 accreditation criteria questions in which the experts were asked to mark one of the statements *Should be definitely asked (4), Should be asked (3), Might be possible if not asked (2), Not necessarily should be asked (1)* in a 4-point Likert type scale.

In addition, by adding a *comment* section next to each item in the questionnaire, the experts were asked to make comments regarding the items in cases where they found it necessary. The questionnaire was sent online via LimeSurvey, which is an online questionnaire software. Consequently, 22 experts responded to the questionnaire in the second round.

Data analysis method used in the Delphi technique may change according to the purpose of the research, structure of the rounds, types of research questions and number of participants, and consensus can be defined in a variety of ways (Powell, 2003). In most Delphis, consensus is achieved when a certain percentage of the given responses to the items fall within a prescribed range (Scheibe, Skutsch & Schofer, 2002). Determination of consensus level depends on the topic of the research; for instance in a topic related with health, having 100% consensus might be required (Keeney, Hasson, & McKenna, 2006). However, Williams and Webb (1994) state that some researchers accepted the consensus level as 55% in the studies they conducted. In addition, as for consensus criteria in Delphi studies, measures of central tendency (e.g. mean, mode, median) and dispersion (e.g. standard deviation, interquartile range) are used. Mitchell (1991) asserts that the median is a robust estimator of location because it is not strongly influenced by outlying data points whereas the mean is very sensitive to data in the tails of a distribution.

Similarly, according to Gordon (1994), the group judgment should be based on the median rather than the mean, since single extreme answers can pull the mean unrealistically. Therefore, for the evaluation of the second round responses, frequencies, median and interquartile range (IQR) were calculated by using SPSS software to represent group opinion. In the analysis, the median shows the level of agreement at which half of the responses fall above and half fall below and the IQR is the absolute value of the difference between the 25th and the 75th quartiles (Sahin, 2010). If the IQR is low, it means that the panel is in agreement.

Table: 1
Definition of Consensus

	Definition of Consensus
2nd Round	median ≥ 3 , IQR ≤ 1 , frequency 3-4 \geq %80
3rd Round	median ≥ 5 , IQR ≤ 1 , frequency 5-7 \geq %90

In the study, the first criterion used to indicate consensus was a level of 80% which showed that more than %80 respondents rated 3 or 4 on a 4-point scale. The second criterion was a median of 3 or above and an IQR of 1 or below. In other words, items with a frequency of minimum 80%, with a median of minimum 3, with an IQR of maximum 1 were considered to show consensus as shown in Table 1. As a result of the evaluation, 21 items out of 95 remained below the determined consensus level and omitted.

Third Round

A questionnaire was prepared composing of the remaining 74 items for the third round. In the questionnaire, the panelists were asked to mark the importance degree of the 74 accreditation criteria questions that could be asked in the accreditation process in a 7-point scale, 7 indicating a criterion *very important*. Statistical information of the second round (the frequencies, the median and the IQR of each item) was given as feedback to the panelists. Also a *comment* section was added next to each item. The questionnaire was sent to the panelists via LimeSurvey. Consequently, 18 experts responded to the third round questionnaire. The responses of the third round were evaluated according to the determined consensus criteria by using SPSS.

For the third round, the criteria used to indicate consensus was a frequency of 90%, a median of 5 or above and an IQR of 1 or below in a 7-point scale as shown in Table 1. As a result, 8 items were omitted as they remained below the consensus level.

Second Strand

The goal of the second strand was to determine the appropriate accreditation process for ODL programs in Turkey and to discuss in-depth the results of the first strand regarding the accreditation criteria. In order to achieve this goal, data were collected via focus group interview, which is a process of collecting data through interviews with a group of people on a specific topic (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2002). The researcher asks a few questions on the topic and gets responses from all participants in the group (Creswell, 2008). Focus group interviews are cost-effective ways of collecting in-depth information in a relatively short period of time (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). In this study, as the accreditation of ODL is a novel issue in Turkey, data were considered to be collected via focus group interview best in order to get various kinds of views from the experts in an interactive environment.

Selection of Participants

Participants of focus group interview were 21 academicians, who were experts in accreditation/quality assurance and/or ODL from 12 different universities in Turkey and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. They were selected through purposive and snowball sampling method.

Firstly, several academicians who met the expertise criteria working in various universities were contacted as well as the Delphi panel experts via e-mail or phone. Consequently, 21 academicians, 11 of whom were the Delphi panelists, accepted to participate in the focus group interview.

Focus Group Interview Process

The preparation of the focus group interview started on January, 2011 and the interview was conducted on February 26, 2011 in Eskisehir. A couple of days before the study, the participants were informed about the interview. They were given detailed information about the purpose of the study, the schedule and the names of the other participants via e-mail. In addition to this, participants were given more detailed information on the day of the interview, and a list containing the accreditation criteria developed in the first strand was distributed to the participants.

At the beginning of the interview, it was intended to conduct 3 different groups of interviews, each group consisting of 7 people, in order to get a variety of perspectives. However, the participants indicated that discussing the topic all together would be more effective than having 3 different groups as the accreditation is a very novel issue in Turkey. Due to the preference of the participants, instead of creating small groups, a single focus group interview was conducted including 21 people. The focus group interview was arranged through one day, between 09:00 and 15:30 in three sessions each of which lasted for one and a half hours.

This can be regarded as a limitation of this study because in the literature it is indicated that focus group interviews consist of 4 to 6 or 6 to 10 people and they are

conducted for one to two hours (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2002). In a focus group interview, a moderator leads the discussion and he/she must know how to facilitate group discussion (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The moderator in this study was one of the researchers of this study who met the expertise criteria used in the participant selection of the Delphi and focus group interview. He had good interpersonal skills and experience in managing group communication processes. The focus group interview was recorded using an audiotape so that the data could be analyzed later. In addition, the other researcher took notes during the sessions. As Creswell (2008) suggested, after transcribing the records of each session, the researchers read the data several times in order to get a general sense of the material, and coded them. They were coded according to the questions posed in the focus group interview. Then, the data were explained and interpreted. In order to provide reliability, another researcher coded the data and intercoder reliability was calculated as 85% with the formulation suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Trustworthiness of the Study

Traditional approaches used for providing validity and reliability are not easily applicable to the Delphi studies (Fish & Busby, 2005). However, several different techniques are used to determine whether Delphi studies are valid and reliable or not. For instance, in Delphi studies, content validity is sought, which is usually identified according to the related literature and expert judgment (Paykoc & Ok, 1990). In order to provide content validity in this study, the researchers carried out an extensive literature review and benefited from the views of some other experts throughout the research. In addition, as the content in Delphi studies is created by the expert panel, the validity is directly related to the selection of the panel experts (Fish & Busby, 2005). So, it is very important to define clearly the qualifications that the panel members should have and to select the members according to those determined qualifications (Clayton, 1997). Therefore, in the study, the required qualifications were defined clearly, and the experts were selected among the ones having those qualifications. Besides, for the verification of results, Skulmoski et al. (2007) suggest conducting a follow-up study after Delphi, such as interviews or survey. In this study, the results of the Delphi were discussed in-depth in the focus group interview.

In the literature, it is accepted that the Delphi technique is as reliable as the other techniques for forecasting, creating consensus of opinion, making decision, etc. (Paykoc & Ok, 1990; Ono & Wedemeyer, 1994). According to Fish and Busby (2005, p.250), "reliability between first and second questionnaires can be estimated by exploring the consensus rates of the respondents and if a reasonable level of consensus is produced on many items on the second questionnaire, it is likely that a researcher has adequately summarized the meaning behind responses of the first questionnaire." In this study, consensus was achieved on many items both in the second and third round.

Moreover, Mitchell (1991) states that clarity of the items affects reliability of the results and suggests testing the questionnaires in advance. Therefore, in order to ensure the clarity of items, the questionnaires were checked by the experts in the field of assessment and evaluation and Turkish language. Besides, the questionnaires were applied to 3 people who have similar backgrounds with the panelists and revised before each round.

RESULTS

The Accreditation Process

Based on the findings, literature and the quality concerns about the Turkish ODL programs, a different accreditation process is proposed apart from other country cases in order to increase the quality of rapidly increasing ODL programs and to improve these programs continuously. It is proposed to establish a separate, self-governing accreditation agency responsible for quality assurance and accreditation activities of ODL, and this agency is expected work in cooperation with the field specific program accreditation agencies that had been established or will be established in the Bologna Process. The ODL accreditation agency is thought not only to accredit the programs or institutions, but also to give a counseling service for higher education institutions, by leading and supporting the research towards increasing the quality of ODL at the same time. In this framework, giving an initial accreditation to new opening programs and afterwards repeating the accreditation process in every 5 years is suggested. The initial accreditation process might be thought as the permission to open a program.

When the accreditation processes of other countries are examined, it can be seen that while in some countries the process for new and ongoing programs is the same, in some others a different process is followed for the newly opened programs.

For instance, in the accreditation agency NVAO in the Netherlands, different regulations are being used for the new and ongoing programs (Frederiks, 2010). In FH Council, which is one of the accreditation agencies that operates in Austria, initial accreditation is given to new programs; and afterwards the accreditation is being renewed once in every 5 years (Sohm, 2004), as similar to the suggestions of the experts participated in this research.

In this study, for giving an initial accreditation to a newly opening ODL program, the stages are suggested to occur as given below:

- The higher education institution applies to the Higher Education Council (HEC) to open an ODL program.
- The application is examined by HEC and if HEC approves the application *to be evaluated*, then forwards it to the field specific program accreditation agency for an accreditation review.
- The higher education institution prepares a self-assessment report and presents it to the program accreditation agency.
- The program accreditation agency contacts with the ODL accreditation agency and these two agencies examine the self-assessment report together within a committee that will be established collectively.
- The two agencies organize a team visit consisting of 3 people; 2 field experts from the field specific program accreditation agency and 1 ODL expert from the ODL accreditation agency.
- The team prepares an evaluation report and presents it to the committee that had been established collectively before in Stage 4.
- The committee determines its opinion regarding whether the program can be opened or not and notifies it to HEC.
- HEC decides whether to open the program or not.

The initial accreditation process is estimated to be completed minimum in 2 months. In the suggested model, after the initial accreditation, renewing the accreditation of ongoing programs once in every 5 years is being suggested.

In the process of renewing the accreditation of an ODL program in which an initial accreditation is given, the stages are suggested to occur as given below:

- The Higher Education Institution Applies To The Field Specific Program Accreditation Agency, Prepares A Self-Assessment Report And Presents It.
- The Program Accreditation Agency Contacts With The ODL Accreditation Agency And These Two Agencies Examine The Self-Assessment Report Together Within A Committee That Will Be Established Collectively.
- The Two Agencies Organize A Team Visit Consisting Of 4 People; 1 Field Expert From The Field Specific Program Accreditation Agency, 2 ODL Experts From The ODL Accreditation Agency-1 From Technical Area And The Other From Design, Management, Etc. Areas- And 1 ODL Student.
- The Team Prepares An Evaluation Report And Presents It To The Committee That Had Been Established Collectively Before In Stage 2.
- The Committee Decides Whether To Renew The Accreditation Or Not, And Makes Comments And Suggestions To The Institution In Order To Improve The Program.

Duration of a re-accreditation process may change according to the higher education institution's self-assessment report preparation time; however the whole process is estimated to be completed at least in 3 months. The proposed framework for the accreditation of new and ongoing ODL programs is shown in Figure 1.



Figure: 1
Proposed Accreditation Framework for ODL Programs

During both initial accreditation and re-accreditation process, the field specific program accreditation agency is supposed to focus on whether criteria established towards the learning outcomes are carried out or not, while the ODL accreditation agency is inspecting whether the ODL methods are applied effectively or not, by evaluating the practice in terms of the method.

In addition to this, ODL programs which already operate and had not been in the accreditation process before have been suggested to go through the same accreditation process as a pre-accredited program's accreditation renewal process.

The Criteria That Will Be Used In The Accreditation Process

In this study, based on the findings and literature, 35 criteria for initial accreditation of newly opening programs; and 42 criteria for re-accreditation of ongoing programs have been developed.

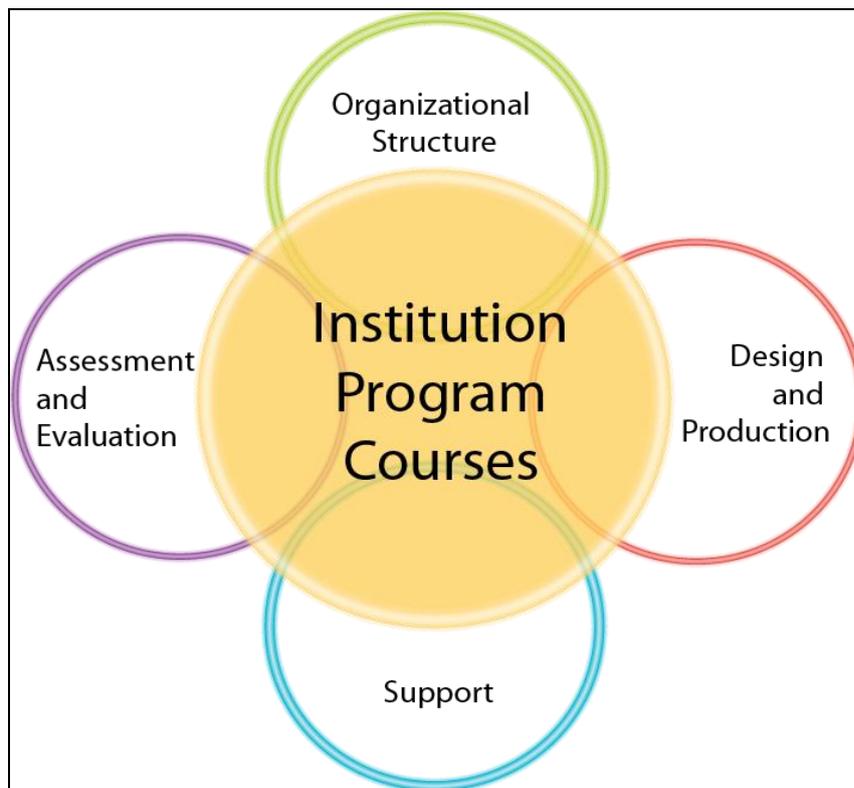


Figure 2
Dimensions of the Criteria Matrix

Differently from the criteria used in other countries, a 2-dimensional matrix has been created on the developed criteria. As shown in Figure 2, the first dimension of the matrix consists of 3 levels; *the institution, the program and the courses*. In each of the levels, there exist criteria regarding *the organizational structure, the design and production, the support services, the assessment and evaluation* elements that constitute the second dimension of the matrix. The elements that exist in the second dimension of the matrix are the most featured elements of ODL.

Table: 2
Initial Accreditation Criteria Matrix

	Organizational Structure	Design and production	Support	Assessment and evaluation
Institution	1, 2, 3, 4, 6,7, 8		5, 10	9
Program	11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 24	16, 25, 26	17, 20, 21, 22, 23	18, 27
Courses	30, 31	35	28, 33, 34	29, 32

Table: 3
Re-accreditation Criteria Matrix

	Organizational Structure	Design and production	Support	Assessment and evaluation
Institution	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8		5, 10	9
Program	11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 24	16, 25, 26	17, 20, 21, 22, 23	18, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31
Courses	33, 34, 35	39, 42	32, 38, 40	36, 37, 41

The suggested criteria for the newly opening and ongoing programs are given in Appendix A and Appendix B respectively; the relation of suggested criteria and their related titles are given in Table 2 and Table 3 in the criteria matrix by indicating the criteria number.

CONCLUSION

QA and accreditation practices in ODL are still a relatively new issue compared with face-to-face education in the world (Jung et al., 2011). Similarly, QA and accreditation processes are still at an early stage of development in Turkey (Ozkul & Latchem, 2011). As Jung et al. (2011) indicate that these practices are affected by societal and cultural environments of each country; it was intended to develop a framework for the accreditation of ODL programs that meets Turkey's social, cultural and educational requirements by seeking expert opinions in this study. As a result, a different accreditation process is proposed when compared to the practices of other countries. The major difference from other country cases is the provision of cooperation between the ODL accreditation agency and the field specific program accreditation agencies. Moreover, two separate processes have been proposed for new and ongoing ODL programs. Besides, 35 criteria for the newly opening programs; and 42 criteria for ongoing programs have been developed to be used in the proposed accreditation process. Differently from the criteria used in other countries, a 2-dimensional matrix has been created on the developed criteria. In the next step, it is intended to create a rubric from these criteria and apply it to a few ODL programs in a pilot study. In Turkey, as the accreditation of ODL is a novel issue, more research is needed including a wide range of stakeholders such as administrators working in the ODL institutions, employers or students as well as academicians.

In Turkey, it is crucial to ensure the autonomy of accreditation agencies to have a robust ODL accreditation system. In other words, accreditation decisions should be made independent from politics. Especially developing countries confront problems in establishing effective accreditation systems since they do not have qualified human resources in the field of accreditation and they lack sufficient financial resources. In order to have an effective system, a quality culture should be adopted in the educational institutions by including all the staff in the accreditation process. Moreover, the staff should be trained about the philosophy, purpose and process of an accreditation system.

Finally, the ODL accreditation criteria require being dynamic because of the continuously changing features of ODL due to the developments in information and communication technologies. Therefore, they should be updated according to the requirements of the ODL field by the accreditation agencies. Besides, the qualifications determined in the National Qualifications Framework can be reviewed in terms of ODL programs.

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APPENDIX A

INITIAL ACCREDITATION CRITERIA

Institution

1. as the institution notified its vision, mission, plans, objectives and goals clearly regarding ODL? H
2. as the institution constructed a management and an organizational structure for carrying out ODL practices? H
3. re there enough and competent human resources in the institution to carry out plans towards ODL? A
4. oes the institution have the systems that will make ODL system work efficiently for the ODL personnel and students, such as the support services, learning management system, student information system, decision support system, information management system, library facilities, staff management system, etc.? D
5. oes the institution have systems providing ODL students to reach the library facilities and sources easily? D
6. oes the institution have sufficient technical infrastructure (eg. the server services, enough capacity to access the internet, etc.) to run ODL programs? D
7. ave the precautions been taken regarding the security of the technical infrastructure in the institution? H
8. oes the institution have policies towards disabled students? 115D
9. re there any evaluation systems and development plans in which continuous feedback can be taken towards the improvement of the ODL system in the institution? A

10. D
Does the institution have plans which will coach the administrative and academic personnel who will take place in running the ODL system and contribute to their professional development?

Program

11. I
Is the information below notified clearly?
Type of the program (professional or academic)
Objectives and aims of the program
Outcomes of the program (Compatible program qualifications with the National Qualifications Framework and related field of study qualifications)
Educational goals
Educational opportunities
The state of the program; whether it is a discipline or inter-disciplinary (the relationship of the program with other disciplines)
Entry requirements
Graduation requirements
Job opportunities
Flexible teaching and assessment strategies that fits ODL
12. I
Is there adequate number of academic and administrative staff to run the program such as faculty, support personnel, technical infrastructure experts, assessment experts, etc.?
13. I
Is the program compatible with the needs and objectives of the country/region and sector?
14. I
Is the program compatible with the institutional vision, mission, objectives, aims and policies?
15. A
Are there any financial regulations and plans (on topics such as copyright, salaries, fees, costs, etc.) to start and sustain the program?
16. I
Is it intended to have a universal instructional design in the program that is compatible with the institution's policies towards disabled students?
17. I
Is it intended to ensure learning opportunities for students other than courses such as library facilities, learning sources, activities, etc. in the program?
18. I
Is it intended to construct evaluation systems and improvement plans to have continuous feedback towards developing the program?
19. I
Is it intended to establish an internal quality assurance process in the program related with design, production and assessment of the course materials?
20. I
Is it intended to provide administrative support for students in various¹¹⁶ environments, such as registration, examination dates, documents necessary for military issues, etc.?
21. I
Is it intended to provide continuous and immediate technological support for

- students in various environments, such as password issues, access to courses, technical problems, etc.?
22. I
Is it intended to provide support for academic and administrative staff who take place in the program while they are implementing the program?
23. I
Is it intended to construct any systems that enable students to interact socially other than courses?
24. H
Have the competencies, job descriptions, roles, duty and responsibilities of full-time and part-time staff (both academic and administrative) been identified clearly?
25. H
Have the content, instructional methods and media used in the program been designed to enable students to gain the required program qualifications?
26. H
Has the program been designed to provide students the opportunity to plan their educational process (course selection, the period to finish the program, etc.) by themselves?
27. H
Have the assessment methods and tools been designed to provide a valid and reliable measurement of the program qualifications?

Course

28. I
Is it intended to provide support services for the academic staff while developing the courses?
29. H
Have the objectives, aims, learning outcomes, instructional methods, content and the assessment methods of the courses been identified clearly?
30. H
Have the courses been determined according to the credit system of the university and ECTS?
31. A
Are the learning outcomes of the courses compatible with the program qualifications? (Are there any program qualifications and learning outcomes matrix?)
32. F
For each course, is it explained how to ensure valid and reliable assessment methods and tools proper for the program's assessment strategy?
33. I
Is it intended to provide educational support for students whenever they need regarding the course content?
34. I
Is it intended to provide any information sources for students in the courses to improve themselves other than the learning outcomes?
35. 117 I
Is it intended to provide adequate student-student, student-teacher, student-content and student-interface interaction in the courses that will provide to reach the learning outcomes?

APPENDIX B

RE-ACCREDITATION CRITERIA

Institution

1. as the institution notified its vision, mission, plans, objectives and goals clearly regarding ODL? H
2. as the institution constructed a management and an organizational structure for carrying out ODL practices? H
3. are there enough and competent human resources in the institution to carry out plans towards ODL? A
4. as the institution constructed the systems that will make ODL system work efficiently for the ODL personnel and students, such as the support services, learning management system, student information system, decision support system, information management system, library facilities, staff management system, etc.? H
5. does the institution have systems providing ODL students to reach the library facilities and sources easily? D
6. does the institution have sufficient technical infrastructure (eg. the server services, enough capacity to access the internet, etc.) to run ODL programs? D
7. have the precautions been taken regarding the security of the technical infrastructure in the institution? H
8. does the institution have policies towards disabled students? D
9. are there any evaluation systems and development plans in which continuous feedback can be taken towards the improvement of the ODL system in the institution? A
10. does the institution have plans which will coach the administrative and academic personnel who take place in running the ODL system and contribute to their professional development? D

Program

11. Is the information below notified clearly? I
Type of the program (professional or academic)
Objectives and aims of the program
Outcomes of the program (Compatible program qualifications with the National¹¹⁸ Qualifications Framework and related field of study qualifications)
Educational goals
Educational opportunities
The state of the program; whether it is a discipline or inter-disciplinary (the relationship of the program with other disciplines)

Entry requirements

Graduation requirements

Job opportunities

Flexible teaching and assessment strategies that fits ODL

12. **I**
s there adequate number of academic and administrative staff to run the program such as faculty, support personnel, technical infrastructure experts, assessment experts, etc.?
13. **I**
s the program compatible with the needs and objectives of the country/region and sector?
14. **I**
s the program compatible with the institutional vision, mission, objectives, aims and policies?
15. **A**
re there any financial regulations and plans (on topics such as copyright, salaries, fees, costs, etc.) to have a sustainable program?
16. **I**
s there a universal instructional design in the program that is compatible with the institution's policies towards disabled students?
17. **I**
n the program, are there any learning opportunities for students other than courses such as library facilities, learning sources, activities, etc.?
18. **A**
re there any evaluation systems and improvement plans to have continuous feedback towards developing the program?
19. **I**
s there an internal quality assurance process in the program related with design, production and evaluation of the course materials?
20. **H**
ave the students been provided administrative support in various environments, such as registration, examination dates, documents necessary for military issues, etc.?
21. **H**
ave the students been provided continuous and immediate technological support in various environments, such as password issues, access to courses, technical problems, etc.?
22. **D**
oes the academic and administrative staff who takes place in the program have support while they are implementing the program?
23. **A**
re there any systems that enable students to interact socially other than courses?
24. **H**
ave the competencies, job descriptions, roles, duty and responsibilities of full-time and part-time staff (both academic and administrative) been identified clearly?
25. **H**
ave the content, instructional methods and media used in the program been designed to enable students to gain the required program qualifications?
26. **H**
as the program been designed to provide students the opportunity to plan¹¹⁹ their educational process (course selection, the period to finish the program, etc.) by themselves?
27. **D**
o assessment methods and tools provide a valid and reliable measurement of the program qualifications?

28. **ave the program qualifications expected from the graduated students and realized program qualifications been parallel?** H
29. **as any feedback been gotten from the students and the academic staff regarding the program?** H
30. **ave the student satisfaction rates been measured and are there any improvements made according to the results?** H
31. **s there any statistical information related with the program? Are there any policy decisions taken according to the evaluation results of this statistical information?** I

Course

32. **re there any support services for the academic staff while developing the courses?** A
33. **re the objectives, aims, learning outcomes, instructional methods, content and the assessment methods of the courses presented clearly to the students in various environments?** A
34. **ave the courses been determined according to the credit system of the university and ECTS?** H
35. **re there clear explanations presented to students regarding the courses (methods used, media, environments, tools, instructions, messages, etc.)?** A
36. **re the learning outcomes of the courses compatible with the program qualifications? (Are there any program qualifications and learning outcomes matrix?)** A
37. **or each course, are there valid and reliable assessment methods and tools proper for the program's assessment strategy?** F
38. **s there an educational support service whenever the students need regarding the course content?** I
39. **re the learning materials used in the courses appropriate in terms of usability (visual design, easy access, navigation)?** A
40. **re there any information sources in the courses provided for the students to improve themselves other than the learning outcomes?** A
41. **o teaching-learning activities provide students to reach the expected learning outcomes?** D
42. **oes the design of the courses provide adequate student-student, student-teacher, student-content and student-interface interaction that will provide to reach the learning outcomes?** D