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Quality Assurance in Initial Teacher Education: Experiences and Developments in Undergraduate Teacher Training Program Accreditation¹

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to evaluate the quality assurance and accreditation systems of undergraduate teacher training programs in Türkiye within the framework of their legal basis, processes, practices and experiences. The research, structured with a case study design, is based on the methods and principles of the qualitative research approach. The data sources used in the research consist of laws and regulations containing legal regulations regarding quality assurance and accreditation in higher education institutions in Türkiye, documents related to the Association for Evaluation and Accreditation of Teacher Education Programs (EPDAD), data obtained from academic staff, administrators, students and evaluators involved in the accreditation process. The data were collected using semi-structured interview forms and document review techniques and analysed with descriptive content analysis method. The research results reveal that there have been significant developments in quality assurance and accreditation with the regulations issued since 2002. It has been concluded that the standards in teacher education established by EPDAD consist of seven different standard areas and are located under three different groups: initial, process and product. Teacher training program stakeholders generally approach accreditation processes positively. In particular, accountability, quality education, quality, equality, standardization, continuous development and contributions to system operation were emphasized by the stakeholders. However, criticisms such as the intensity of documentation, the short duration of accreditation visits, the inadequacy of stakeholders in informing them about accreditation processes, and the lack of awareness regarding the purpose of accreditation were also voiced. In line with the findings obtained, it is recommended that stakeholders be informed comprehensively in accreditation processes, a continuous and effective communication mechanism be established between the programs to be accredited and the accreditation bodies, the EPDAD evaluator pool be developed in terms of both quality and quantity, and steps be taken to reduce the intensity of documentation.

Keywords: accreditation, accreditation in teacher education programs, quality assurance.

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Introduction

The increasing globalization of higher education, propelled by internationalization, emphasizes the importance of harmonizing educational systems with global benchmarks while promoting greater accountability and transparency (Smidt, 2015). This transformation highlights the centrality of quality in education, addressing the dynamic needs and expectations of modern society (Bergh, 2011). Moreover, the increasing demand for higher education, combined with rapid technological, economic, and social transformations, has heightened the need for skilled professionals and accessible information, prompting society to expect more advanced and comprehensive services from universities.

The dynamics of international student mobility, cross-border educational institutions, and the liberalization of services within a globalized economy have redefined higher education, extending its scope beyond national boundaries. A critical issue emerges concerning the metrics and standards used to evaluate these diverse institutions, which operate with varying missions and objectives, and how well these measures capture and reflect educational quality. Consequently, ensuring that the quality of universities aligns with comprehensive qualitative and quantitative assessment frameworks has become essential. The forces of globalization and internationalization have significantly broadened access to universities (Knight, 2007), diminishing the relevance of national borders while amplifying competition among institutions, particularly through the influence of university rankings (Ülker & Bakioğlu, 2019). In response, universities have increasingly adopted quality assurance mechanisms, including accreditation processes, to demonstrate their commitment to delivering high-quality educational services and meeting evolving global standards (Romanowski, 2022). As challenges in teaching and research within higher education increasingly transcend national boundaries, there has been a heightened global emphasis on quality assurance. As a result, various mechanisms have been widely implemented to sustain and enhance quality (OECD, 2009).

Globalization, which profoundly influences countries, cultures, and lifestyles, inevitably impacts higher education as well (Knight, 2008). As globalization becomes increasingly central to higher education, the significance of competitive environments grows. Consequently, there has been a worldwide shift towards adopting quality assurance systems and international benchmarking practices that prioritize accountability and control mechanisms (Marginson, 2007). The increasing emphasis on global competition in education highlights the importance of universities obtaining international accreditation. Such accreditation serves as a reliable marker of quality standards, enabling institutions to maintain their competitiveness and ensure long-term sustainability in the global education arena (Ewell, 2008). This assurance is essential for these institutions to maintain their operations and succeed in the international competitive arena.

The growing demand for universities has heightened the expectations of both national and global stakeholders regarding academic quality. For these reasons, it has become necessary to develop academic quality indicators that can guide individuals' choices (Dill & Beerkens, 2013). Academic quality plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' readiness for their professional lives. Examining higher education programs with a focus on academic quality is essential. Kohler (2003) highlights that the effectiveness of educational programs is closely tied to the quality they embody, directly impacting the outcomes achieved. From this perspective, it can be argued that well-structured programs fostering personal development also enhance the overall academic quality. Consequently, the significance of program quality becomes evident, particularly in helping institutions optimize individuals' skills and

competencies. Because universities help individuals achieve their educational goals through their programs and they must act in this direction (Kuh, 2009).

The search for quality in higher education initially began with institutional evaluation studies; later, it was continued with approaches such as total quality management, and in recent years, accreditation practices have come to the fore (Tezsürücü & Bursalioglu, 2013). Accreditation is a quality assurance mechanism that involves the evaluation and approval process of a program or institution by external experts in line with previously determined quality standards (Jones, 2002; Sanyal & Martin, 2007). As a quality assessment method, accreditation is widely preferred by institutions and programs (Volkwein, 2010). In the educational process, especially in the context of higher education, accreditation is considered a self-regulatory process used to secure academic quality and ensure continuous improvement (Davenport, 2001). In other words, a student who graduates from an accredited higher education institution is assured that he/she has received a qualified education (First World Summit on Accreditation, 2012). At the end of the accreditation process, institutions or programs are expected to document that they meet quality standards. In this context, it is an integral part of the process for institutions to demonstrate to what extent they meet the determined accreditation standards.

Accreditation in higher education is examined under two headings: institutional accreditation and program accreditation (Coffey & Millsaps, 2004). In institutional accreditation, the general capacity of the services provided by the educational institution is evaluated and the relevant institution is accredited at the end of the process. In this process, all professional areas of expertise within the institution are also included in the scope of accreditation (Hou, 2011; Kohler, 2003). Institutional accreditation is an evaluation process that covers all higher education institutions, whether profit-oriented or non-profit, granting or not granting degrees (Eaton, 2003). This evaluation is carried out in line with pre-determined standards such as employee qualifications, student admission conditions, and learning resources. In short, institutional accreditation is a quality assurance process that includes a comprehensive and holistic examination of all academic programs, academic and administrative staff, physical infrastructure, and social facilities (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2020).

Program accreditation, also called specialized accreditation or professional accreditation, involves the evaluation and accreditation of a specific program within higher education institutions in line with quality and excellence standards (Eaton, 2003; Harvey, 2004; Hou, 2011; Kohler, 2003). This type of accreditation usually involves the examination of specific programs, departments or schools, which are subunits of an institution, in terms of quality assurance. A unit to be accredited may be as large as a department within a higher education institution or as small as only one program of a specific academic discipline. Program accreditation focuses on a more limited set of standards specific to the field of study being evaluated.

Program accreditation refers to a formal process by which academic programs are evaluated against established standards to ensure quality and foster continuous improvement. Closely related to this is program evaluation, which involves systematically collecting and analysing data to assess a program's effectiveness and inform decision-making (Lynch, 1996; Fitzpatrick et al., 2004). While program evaluation focuses on understanding a program's outcomes and areas for development, accreditation integrates these findings into a structured framework for accountability and improvement (Goldie, 2006; Wolf et al., 2006). In this regard, accreditation can be considered both a quality assurance mechanism and a developmental tool for higher education institutions.

Accreditation initiatives aim to improve the quality of services, ensuring they meet predefined standards, and systematically maintaining their consistency (Brittingham, 2008). The rising demand for higher education, the proliferation of institutions providing these services, and the necessity to assure their quality have contributed to the widespread adoption of accreditation practices (Kavak, 2007). Although universities hold a privileged status due to their significant contributions to both society and individuals, public trust in these institutions has notably diminished in recent years (Sarrico et al., 2010). At the same time, increasing attention has been directed toward the quality of institutions and programs, bringing quality-related concerns to the forefront of higher education discussions (Lingenfelter, 2001). The increasing student population, influenced by emerging trends, has further amplified worries regarding the quality of higher education (Petersen, 1999). To address these issues, accrediting universities through evaluation mechanisms provided by accreditation bodies is regarded as a robust method for demonstrating the provision of exceptional educational experiences (Knight, 2007). The primary aim is to establish universities as centres of academic distinction, ensuring their role as dependable contributors to high-quality outcomes (Bleiklie, 2011).

Criticisms, Deficiencies and Problems Regarding Accreditation

Accreditation processes in higher education provide significant benefits to all stakeholders, particularly to the institutions undergoing accreditation. Accreditation is widely regarded as a mechanism for promoting transparency and accountability within higher education. As Latchem (2011) highlights, accreditation facilitates the development of quality policies at every stage of the teaching process, ensures the systematic regulation of these policies, and supports effective quality control. However, despite these advantages, accreditation practices in higher education face criticism from some researchers. It is argued that such practices may constrain creativity and innovation within academic institutions. Rozsnyai (2004), for instance, contends that accreditation processes and the bureaucrats working in quality assurance organizations often reinforce and expand their influence over higher education systems, potentially limiting institutional autonomy.

In addition to stating that accreditation studies are inadequate in providing effective internal quality, some researchers state that these processes impose an intense bureaucratic workload on faculty members (Harvey, 2004). There is a perception that accreditation, especially in universities where academic standards are above acceptable levels, creates an undue burden on institution administrators and academic staff (Dill, 2000). In addition to the bureaucratic burden it brings, accreditation studies cannot provide a sufficiently critical perspective in the competitive environment of the new century (Sanyal & Martin, 2007) and cannot sufficiently influence the institutional measures and decision-making mechanisms that will be taken as a result of these practices (Ewell, 2000). Accreditation cannot fully reveal whether students have acquired the knowledge and skills in line with their needs and whether they are ready for business life. For these reasons, accreditation studies are criticized for being incomplete in revealing real performances (Saunders, 2007). Moreover, even if the teaching process is tried to be evaluated in accreditation, since field visits are determined well in advance, faculty members can prepare themselves to teach their best lessons or institution administrators can choose the people to be interviewed according to their own aims (Rothstein et al., 2009).

Another criticism of accreditation is that it is very costly in economic terms to continue accreditation studies systematically for a long time, and that such practices generally fail to

provide effective internal quality assurance in an institutional sense because they focus on the course level (Dill, 2010). Schray (2006) mentions that accreditation has not been improved as required and emphasizes that some of the current accreditation studies are carried out by for-profit institutions and cannot adequately respond to the diversity in higher education. Put differently, institutions authorized for accreditation cannot effectively evaluate higher education systems and are therefore criticized for being incomplete in the implementation of sanctions (Kis, 2005).

Accreditation in higher education can be examined under two headings: institution accreditation and program accreditation (Coffey & Millsaps, 2004). In institutional accreditation the capacity of the services offered by the educational institution is examined and at the end of the process the relevant institution is accredited. In institutional accreditation, all professional areas of expertise that continue to exist in the institution that goes through the accreditation process are accredited (Hou, 2011; Kohler, 2003). In this type of accreditation process all universities, whether for-profit or non-profit, diploma-granting or not, are evaluated (Eaton, 2003). The evaluation process in the context of predetermined standards on issues such as employee competencies, student entry requirements, and learning resources is important in institutional accreditation. In summary, institutional accreditation studies include a comprehensive and holistic review of all academic programs, staff, and physical and social facilities (CHEA, 2020). In program accreditation, also called specialized accreditation or professional accreditation, a specific program within the institution is accredited by evaluating it with quality and excellence standards (Eaton, 2003; Harvey, 2004; Hou, 2011; Kohler, 2003). Program accreditation focuses on assessing the quality and adherence to standards of a particular academic program, while institutional accreditation evaluates the comprehensive quality and performance of all programs and services provided by a university.

The Emergence and Necessity of Quality Assurance Systems and Accreditation in Higher Education and Teacher Education Programs

In Europe and surrounding countries, the construction of a structure based on a common understanding and accumulation of quality assurance systems in higher education within the scope of the process of establishing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) began with a decision taken by the European Union Council on January 24, 1998, before the Bologna Declaration (Kusnir & Yazgan, 2024). This initiative was founded in the 1990s with the establishment of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA); and it was further developed and gained significant momentum with the support of the Lisbon and Bologna processes. ENQA plays a central role within the Bologna process by undertaking the task of ensuring mutual recognition of the quality assurance systems of member countries and the coordination of these systems (CoHE, 2007). The studies carried out within the scope of the EHEA and the principles and standards developed within this framework were compiled in the report "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG)" published by the ENQA in 2005 (Stensaker & Matear, 2024). The report in question was officially accepted by the ministers responsible for education of the countries party to the Bologna process at the meeting held in Bergen in the same year.

In the Consolidation Phase of the Quality Assurance Framework between 2008 and 2014, at the Leuven Conference held in 2009, ministers drew attention to the importance of continuing cooperation in order to develop quality assurance on a European scale. It was also emphasized that the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) should be subject to independent external evaluation. In addition, it was stated that international education services

should be addressed in line with the ESG and the International Quality Assurance Principles determined by UNESCO/OECD. Although certain progress has been made in the field of quality assurance during this period, the establishment of a sustainable quality culture in higher education institutions has not yet reached the desired level in many countries. Although the ESG defined the scope of institutional quality assurance in teaching and learning processes, it did not provide a guiding framework on how these processes should be implemented (ENQA, 2005). Therefore, it cannot be said that external quality assurance mechanisms fully contribute to the efforts of higher education institutions to improve quality in teaching and learning (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2020).

In the development phase of the Quality Assurance Framework in the period 2015-2019, the revised version of the ESG was accepted at the Yerevan Conference held in 2015 and it was stated that students and other stakeholders should be actively and fully involved in program design and quality assurance processes. With the acceptance of the ESG 2015, the quality assurance model in the EHEA gained a more solid structure. During this period, the implementation of the evaluation, accreditation, audit, certification, authorization, and review processes carried out by quality assurance institutions and the European Approach developed for Joint Programs brought about the diversification of quality assurance approaches. ESG 2015 introduced important changes, especially in the standards and guides related to internal quality assurance, including various technical improvements. However, despite all these developments, it has been clearly stated in the Bologna Process Implementation Reports that concrete progress towards the implementation of ESG remains limited (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2020).

Quality assurance systems have been on the agenda as a concept that has maintained its relevance, especially in recent years in Türkiye. With the studies carried out within the scope of the Bologna Process, it has been observed that higher education institutions in Türkiye have started to be included in quality assurance systems and that awareness on the subject has increased in these institutions (Council of Higher Education, 2006). In this context, in 1997, the CoHE with the support of the British Consulate, initiated a pilot project aiming to establish quality assurance systems in higher education institutions. The project aimed to develop research-based academic evaluation processes and to raise academic standards. In line with this goal, a workshop was organized in 1997 with the participation of representatives from 13 departments from eight universities and the evaluation process was initiated. The data obtained through surveys and observations throughout the process were analysed in a meeting held in the same year; and in 1998, the project was concluded with a final report with the contributions of the CoHE Academic Evaluation Board. However, although the establishment of a systematic quality assurance system was targeted, this goal was not fully achieved (Billing & Thomas, 2000).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, a significant increase has been observed in the number of studies on the establishment of quality assurance and accreditation systems in higher education institutions in Türkiye within the scope of Bologna Process. With this process, accreditation institutions have been authorized to carry out accreditation activities in various fields. The impact of Bologna Process on Turkish higher education system can be evaluated in two main dimensions. First, under the guidance of Bologna Process, the educational policies of Turkish higher education institutions have been restructured in line with the criteria determined in order to comply with the European Union. Second, within the scope of quality assurance systems and accreditation processes, strategies aiming to reach European higher education standards have been developed. In line with these goals, it has been decided to establish an accreditation board within CoHE to examine the quality processes in Europe and

to implement a similar structure in Türkiye. As a result of the work of this board, a comprehensive accreditation process has been put into practice by CoHE, especially in faculties of education (Mızıkacı, 2003).

The Sorbonne (1998) and Bologna (1999) Declarations were among the first pioneering steps towards the standardization of the concept of quality in the higher education system in Türkiye. These declarations aimed to establish the European Higher Education Area (EHEA); increase mobility in higher education, strengthen employability and encourage development throughout the continent. In this context, increasing the competitiveness of the European higher education system and ensuring that it becomes attractive on a global scale was determined as one of the main goals. In order to achieve these determined goals, the necessity of transnational cooperation in quality assurance for the development of comparable criteria and methods was emphasized. Quality assurance systems in Türkiye were first implemented by the Academic Evaluation and Quality Development Commission in Higher Education Institutions (YÖDEK) established in accordance with the "Regulation on Academic Evaluation and Quality Improvement in Higher Education Institutions" put into effect by CoHE in 2005. In order to monitor and improve the quality levels of higher education institutions in Turkey, an important process has been initiated in line with the "Regulation on Academic Evaluation and Quality Development in Higher Education Institutions". Within the scope of this process, higher education institutions carry out their own internal evaluations every year and prepare "Academic Evaluation and Quality Development Reports" according to the procedures and principles determined by the Higher Education Academic Evaluation and Quality Development Commission. Thus, a systematic internal evaluation mechanism has been established at both institutional and national levels. Although the regulation in question also includes external evaluation processes, which are one of the basic components of the quality assurance system, it is seen that independent structures that can conduct external evaluation of higher education institutions at the institutional or program level have not yet been put into practice during this period. Therefore, when the current structure of the higher education system and the principles and standards determined in the Bologna Process are considered together, the need for legal and structural arrangements that will support the formation of independent institutions and organizations that will conduct external evaluation processes clearly emerges (CoHE, 2007).

The quality assurance system was given a new structure with the "Regulation on Quality Assurance in Higher Education" published in 2015 and the implementation of accreditation practices at the program and institutional level was taken as the basis (Regulation on Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2015). With this regulation, Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (THEQC) was established to coordinate quality assurance processes at the national level. Another important development in the field of higher education in Türkiye was the entry into force of the "Regulation on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the Higher Education Quality Council" in 2018 (Kavak et al., 2019). Within the scope of this regulation, the recognition of independent external evaluation and accreditation institutions and their authorization for accreditation were given a legal basis (Regulation on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the Higher Education Quality Council, 2018).

Since the early 1980s, concerns and searches for quality, especially in the public sector, have significantly affected the education system and teacher training processes in particular. The quantitative growth of higher education institutions, the increasing concerns about maintaining quality standards in parallel with this growth, ongoing discussions on teacher quality, the increasing importance of accountability and control mechanisms, and factors such as internationalization have formed the basis of approaches and reform searches for quality in

teacher training systems. In this process, a report submitted to CoHE clearly stated that the demand for higher education institutions was rapidly increasing and that an accreditation system that would enable periodic evaluation of quality standards was necessary due to this increase. In this direction, studies on accreditation in education faculties were accelerated and the implementation process was initiated (CoHE, 1999). Developments regarding accreditation studies developed for the teacher training system in the 1990s are summarized chronologically below:

June 1998: Experts working in the National Teacher Training Committee and the Project Management Board examined the teacher training accreditation systems in the USA and England and prepared a report based on these examinations.

October 1998: A working group was formed to prepare accreditation and standards, and work began on the draft of the relevant documents.

November 1998: A conference on accreditation in the field of teacher training was held with the participation of representatives from the faculties of education and the Ministry of National Education.

December 1998: Preliminary studies were initiated in selected faculties of education under the leadership of foreign consultants.

February 1999: A pilot application of an accreditation system consisting of initial, process and outcome standards was carried out in six universities.

April 1999: Findings regarding the pilot applications were presented to representatives from faculties of education and Ministry of National Education, and evaluation meetings were held.

May 1999: Considering the data obtained from the pilot applications, the documents were finalized and published.

June 1999: Training was provided for the evaluators who would take part in the accreditation process. Meetings were held to evaluate the applications with the participation of representatives from education faculties and Ministry of National Education (Kavak, 1999).

The first concrete examples of accreditation in education faculties can be found in the studies carried out in the late 20th century. During this period, the studies carried out under the title of "Standards and Accreditation in Teacher Education" aimed to present a model proposal in order to provide a more qualified structure to teacher training systems. As part of the restructuring process, qualitative improvements were made in the teacher training programs of education faculties and the programs developed within this scope were put into practice as of the 1998–1999 academic year (Kavak, 1999). However, it has been observed that there have been deficiencies in transforming these studies into a long-term and sustainable application model and that accreditation processes have not been carried out effectively in education faculties for a while. This has led to education faculties being deprived of external evaluation mechanisms based on quality assurance. On the other hand, it is seen that accreditation institutions operating in the field of teacher education have been established in many countries that are members of European Union during the same period and that the goal of training qualified teachers has been systematically supported through these institutions.

Studies on accreditation in teacher education programs gained new momentum with the "Education Faculties Initiative Development and Evaluation Workshop" held in 2012. At the end of this workshop, the Education Faculties Deans Council (EFDEK) was established in line with the joint decision of the participating education faculties deans and the directive they

signed. The establishment of EFDEK accelerated the studies on the establishment of quality assurance and accreditation systems in the field of teacher education by bringing them to an institutional basis. As a result of the studies carried out under the leadership of EFDEK, the statute of the Education Faculties Programs Evaluation and Accreditation Association (EPDAD) was prepared as an external evaluation and accreditation organization that will deal with the accreditation of teacher education programs, and the official establishment process of EPDAD was completed on June 14, 2012. In the first years following its establishment, EPDAD focused particularly on information and education studies in order to increase awareness of the accreditation of teacher education programs (Education Faculties Programs Evaluation and Accreditation Association, 2024).

Problem Situation

Globalization has significantly transformed the landscape of universities, compelling countries to reform their education systems and establish flexible structures capable of addressing evolving societal needs. Since the mid-twentieth century, the concepts of accountability and transparency in education have become increasingly significant, driving greater attention to quality in higher education (Meek, 2000; Smidt, 2015). To address the challenges of global competition, the establishment of quality assurance systems and accreditation processes has been indispensable for enhancing educational practices and equipping graduates with essential skills. This emphasis on quality has also highlighted the need for sustainable frameworks that function effectively at both national and international levels (Harvey, 2004). However, significant challenges persist in defining universal standards for universities and maintaining consistency in their application across diverse contexts.

Quality in higher education is inherently abstract, leading to varying interpretations among stakeholders and complicating the establishment of a unified perspective (Frazer, 1992; Scott, 1995). Harvey & Green (1993) describe quality as a 'value-laden' concept, emphasizing the importance of integrating diverse viewpoints in the evaluation process. However, the complex nature of quality assurance systems often poses challenges for their effective implementation, leading to varying perceptions among stakeholders (Smidt, 2015). In Türkiye, while higher education has grown significantly in size, this expansion has not been accompanied by corresponding enhancements in quality, emphasizing the pressing need for a strong quality assurance mechanism. As a result, implementing quality-driven reforms is essential to strengthen the global competitiveness of Türkiye's higher education system.

From this perspective, successful implementation of quality assurance systems and accreditation processes is essential for sustaining universities and boosting their competitiveness in the global arena. However, the deficiencies of existing systems and criticisms of accreditation processes indicate that studies in this area should be addressed more comprehensively and systematically (Harvey, 2002; OECD, 2009). A detailed examination of accreditation practices specifically for Educational Sciences and Faculties of Education and the determination of the effects of these processes on stakeholders will enable the development of more effective policies.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Accreditation practices applied across various disciplines are also utilized in teacher education programs. Universities and academic programs increasingly acknowledge the vital role of quality assurance in delivering high-quality education to future generations. This study

serves as a critical examination of Türkiye's ability to navigate the challenges and transformations linked to quality assurance and accreditation within its higher education system, while also evaluating its capacity to manage these processes effectively. The findings aim to offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and administrators, particularly in promoting awareness of quality education. Additionally, the study is significant for its in-depth analysis of the experiences and viewpoints of stakeholders involved in the accreditation process within Educational Sciences and Faculties of Education, contributing a distinct methodological perspective. Based on this approach, practical recommendations have been developed to improve the efficiency of quality assurance and accreditation systems, ensuring these processes are more transparent, accountable, and sustainable.

The main objective of this study is to evaluate the quality assurance and accreditation systems for undergraduate teacher training programs in Türkiye within the framework of their legal basis, processes, practices and experiences. To achieve this aim, the research sought to address the following key questions:

- 1) What are the legal regulations in terms of quality assurance and accreditation in Türkiye?
- 2) What is the institutional structure and functioning of EPDAD?
- 3) What are the opinions and experiences of academic staff, administrators, students and evaluators regarding the accreditation of teacher education programs?

Limitations

In this study, interviews were conducted with academic staff, students, administrators and evaluators who took part in the evaluation process in order to examine in depth the experiences and evaluations regarding quality assurance in higher education and the accreditation processes of education faculties. However, interviews were not conducted with other important stakeholders of the process such as graduates, employers and representatives of civil society organizations. This situation was shaped within the framework of the limitations regarding the scope of the study and the manageability of the data collection process, and it should be kept in mind that the findings obtained are limited to the perspectives of certain stakeholder groups.

Method

Research Design

In this study, qualitative research method was used, and a case study was preferred as the research design. In qualitative research processes, researchers aim to answer questions such as "how and why" by conducting detailed and understanding-oriented studies rather than quantitative characteristics of the events, people or situations they research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research methods are of great importance in terms of providing in-depth information to researchers on topics where satisfactory information is not available or when a phenomenon or event is to be investigated realistically and in all its aspects (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Similarly, there is an effort to reach an in-depth perception of the event or phenomenon that is the subject of qualitative research (Morgan, 1996). In addition, this research, which was conducted to examine accreditation systems in real environments and in detail, was modelled with a case study design, one of the qualitative research designs. Case studies have been classified in

various ways by different researchers. While Merriam (2009), Stake (1995) and Yin (2014) accepted case studies as a research design in their own right; Bogdan and Biklen (1997) explained case studies under the ethnographic design. Case studies are studies that can be conducted by using various study designs when the structure or characteristics of the situation that is the subject of the research are taken into consideration. Yin (2014) classifies case studies under four headings as single case (holistic) design, single case (embedded) design, multiple case (holistic) design and multiple case (embedded) design.

In this study, the approach developed by Yin (2014), which offers a detailed and comprehensive approach to the formation of a meticulous design in every step of the research process from the creation of research questions to the collection, analysis and reporting of data in light of propositions, was adopted. While the only case evaluated within the scope of this study was accreditation, since different study groups were designed as sub-units, the single case (embedded) design was used in the research process. In single case (embedded) design, it is possible to focus on sub-units in a single case. It was thought that a detailed examination of the embedded structures of the determined sub-units would contribute to the clear disclosure of the status of the research. In this context, data obtained from the sub-analysis units were used to draw conclusions about the research findings., which is the whole of accreditation and quality assurance systems in higher education.

Study Group

The documents of the first research question consist of the laws and regulations regarding the legal regulations of quality assurance and accreditation in Türkiye. Furthermore, the documents of the second research question consist of the regulations regarding EPDAD, which is the authorized institution for the accreditation of Educational Sciences/Faculties of Education in Türkiye, and the official data regarding this association. In the decision-making phase of the research on the documents to be included in the study documents for the first and second research problems, the criterion sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was preferred. The aim of using purposeful sampling in selecting study documents is to enable researchers to select individuals, institutions or documents that can provide the most accurate information (Yin, 2014). In this context, the following criteria were taken as a basis for the inclusion of legal regulations regarding quality assurance and accreditation in higher education institutions in Türkiye and regulations and official documents belonging to EPDAD in the working group:

- The examined laws and regulations determine the structure of the quality assurance and accreditation processes of higher education institutions,

- The examined regulations and official documents in the context of EPDAD define the accreditation structure in undergraduate programs of Educational Sciences/Education Faculties,

- Accreditation-related practices play a decisive role in the establishment of an accreditation model for Educational Sciences/Education Faculties.

The study group for the third research question includes academic staff, administrators, and students from programs accredited by EPDAD. Accredited Educational Sciences/Education Faculties were selected using the criterion sampling method, a type of purposeful sampling. Considering the establishment years of state and private universities regarding the undergraduate programs in Educational Sciences/Education Faculties, the oldest three education faculties from state universities and two education faculties from private

universities were selected. The study group consists of 20 academic staff teaching at the Faculties of Educational Sciences/Education, 9 department heads/program managers/heads of major sciences and 24 students. Interviews were conducted with evaluators who completed a training program provided by EPDAD and took part in a visiting team as a team leader, member or observer. In determining the evaluators, the snowball sampling method, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used. Considering the problem of the research, the snowball sampling method can be used in cases where it is possible to access rich sources of information (Patton, 2014). In this context, 12 evaluators who took part in EPDAD accreditation processes participated in the study.

Data Collection Tools

In qualitative research processes, researchers can investigate the meanings that participants attribute to events, situations or phenomena. For these reasons, Yıldırım & Şimşek (2013) emphasize that creativity, diversity and flexibility come to the fore in data collection and analysis processes in qualitative research. Yin (2014) mentions that as many data collection sources and analyses as possible should be available in case studies. In this context, a comprehensive data collection process was utilized, considering the research questions. Document analysis and interview methods were used to obtain the data. Table 1 provides a summary of the data collection tools utilized in the study, offering a clear overview of the tools used to gather information.

Table 1

Data Collection Methods and Tools

Research Question	Data Collection Method	Data Collection Tool
First and second research questions	Document analysis	Document analysis form
Third research question	Interview	Semi-Structured Interview Form for Academic Staff, Semi-Structured Interview Form for Administrators, Semi-Structured Interview Form for Evaluators, Focus Group Interview Form for Students

To address the first and second research questions related to the documents examined in this study, the researcher employed a self-designed Document Analysis Form. As a qualitative research method, document analysis is widely used to interpret the written materials (Wach & Ward, 2013). This method provides a structured approach to the examination and evaluation of documents related to the research topic, emphasizing the significance of both printed and electronic materials in the process.

Stewart & Cash (1985) call the interactive communication process that takes place in the form of asking questions and receiving answers within a predetermined and specific purpose as the interview method. Fraenkel & Wallen (2006) state that the aim of the interview method is to find out the experiences of individuals and how they make sense of these experiences. The literature review was first conducted during the preparation of the interview forms, and the place of the concept of “accreditation” was examined, and the theoretical basis of the questions

in the interview forms was tried to be established. Considering the problem areas related to the research, the advantages and disadvantages of different interview methods were examined. As a result, it was deemed appropriate to use semi-structured interview forms as the data collection tool for the third research question, involving academic staff, administrators, and evaluators, as well as a focus group interview for students. To test whether the data collection tools were developed in accordance with their purpose, whether they were suitable in terms of language-expression and the validity of the opinion and scope, the opinions of four experts from the field of education programs and teaching, two from the field of measurement and evaluation, one from the field of educational administration and one from the field of Turkish were consulted. In line with expert opinions, the interview forms were restructured, and a pilot application process was carried out with people outside the study group within the scope of validity and reliability study of the interview forms. As a result of the data obtained after the pilot interviews, necessary arrangements were made and necessary changes were made in the instructions and questions of the interview forms.

Data Collection Process

In the document collection process, laws and regulations regarding the legal regulations of quality assurance and accreditation in universities in Türkiye and the documents regarding EPDAD were collected. In this context, in order to identify documents related to the first research question, the regulations that form the basis of quality assurance and accreditation in Turkish higher education were accessed from the website of the Official Gazette, which is published in Türkiye and is the primary source, in November 2023. In addition, in order to determine the documents for the second research question, the website of EPDAD, which is the authorized institution for the accreditation of Educational Sciences/Faculties of Education in Türkiye, was used and the regulations regarding the relevant institution and these official documents were accessed in October 2023.

The interview method was also utilized in the research. Data were obtained through face-to-face interviews or online methods. Semi-structured interview forms and a focus group interview form were used in these interviews. Three different semi-structured interview forms were prepared to determine the opinions/suggestions of academic staff working in accredited Education Sciences/Education Faculty programs at three state and two private universities, administrators serving in these programs, and external evaluators actively involved in the evaluation processes. Additionally, a focus group interview form was prepared to obtain the experiences of students studying in relevant Education Sciences/Education Faculty programs.

To determine the date and place of the meetings with the academic staff and administrators, first of all, the contact information of the programs they were affiliated with was accessed from their websites and an appointment was requested via e-mail. The email provided details about the research objectives. During this process, efforts were made to reach academic staff and administrators who did not respond to e-mails via their extension numbers. Some of the academic staff and administrators did not respond to e-mails and phone calls despite efforts to reach them at four different times. Since the people who served as evaluators were determined by the snowball sampling method, the above-mentioned problems did not occur. To conduct interviews with the students, the course schedules of the programs they were affiliated with were examined and it was aimed to reach the students by taking these schedules into consideration. In this process, some students were reached with the help of academic staff and administrators in the unit they were affiliated with. After the meetings were planned and the time and place were determined, some problems occurred. Although three

academic staff and one administrator agreed to the meeting at first, they stated that they could not hold the meeting due to their workload close to the interview. One evaluator refused to be interviewed because he would unexpectedly undergo surgery due to health problems and did not know how long the recovery process would take. There were no problems in the interviews with the students. In this context, a total of 1850 minutes of interviews were held with participants. Interviews with 20 academics lasted 760 minutes, interviews with 12 evaluators lasted 460 minutes, interviews with 9 administrators lasted 390 minutes, and focus group interviews with 24 students lasted 240 minutes. Since six academic staff, four administrators and one evaluator in the study group did not allow audio/video recording, detailed notes were taken by the researcher and the data were recorded. During the interviews, directive behaviour was avoided and care was taken not to hold interviews, especially in noisy environments.

Data Analysis

In order to collect data for the first and second research questions, documents such as the information/documents on Official Gazette and EPDAD's official websites were accessed. These documents were examined using the document review method. The document review method covers the analysis of materials containing information about the phenomenon or phenomena targeted for investigation. The procedures carried out during the document review process in this research are as follows (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013):

- Accessing Documents: The regulations that form the basis of quality assurance and accreditation in Turkish higher education were accessed from the website of Official Gazette. Furthermore, the website of EPDAD, which is the authorized institution for the accreditation of Educational Sciences/Faculties of Education in Türkiye, was used and the regulations regarding the relevant institution and these official documents were accessed

- Checking the Originality of Documents: Attention was paid to using primary sources in the research.

- Analyzing Data: The documents obtained were examined under certain headings with the help of a document review form.

- Using Data: The data obtained through document review was presented systematically with the help of tables.

Descriptive content analysis method was employed to analyse the data related to the third research question. Content analysis is the process of organizing information regarding basic questions in research processes with the help of categories (Bowen, 2009). Fraenkel & Wallen (2006) explain content analysis as a technique that allows human behaviour to be examined by analysing the data obtained by researchers. In this research, three phases and nine steps were followed;

Phase I: Saving Data

1. Classification of interviews according to different groups: Since interviews were held with different groups at this stage, the interviews were classified while recording.
2. Naming and classification of the interviews: The interviews were named and listed as AS1, AS2, AS3... for academic staff, A1, A2, A3... for administrators, E, E2, E3... for evaluators, and S1, S2, S3 for students.
3. Transferring the data to digital media: After the interviews were conducted, each interview was transferred to the computer.
4. Transcribing the data: Each interview was transcribed by the researcher.

Phase II: Coding the Data

1. Deciding on the most appropriate type of coding for the questions: Since the words were directly determined during the analysis of the data obtained, the type of coding recommended by Fraenkel & Wallen (2006) was preferred.
2. Coding of data: Data obtained from interviews with stakeholders in the study group were coded.
3. Creating themes from codes: In this step, themes were determined by looking at the codes obtained from the data.

Phase III: Interpretation of Data

1. Digitization of the codes and themes obtained: The codes and data obtained from the interviews were digitized with the help of tables.
2. Interpreting and discussing the results with the supporting information: The results obtained through content analysis were supported with the information obtained from the studies in the literature and interpreted using direct quotations.

Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, as in all types of research, one of the basic elements that determines the quality of the study is validity. A valid research refers to a process in which data are collected and analysed meticulously, and the results obtained accurately reflect the phenomenon being investigated (Yin, 2014). Validity is related to ensuring accuracy and credibility in all stages, especially in the descriptive aspect of the research, the results obtained, the explanations and interpretations made (Maxwell, 1996). Maxwell (2009) emphasizes the importance of long-term and intensive participation, comprehensive data collection, comparison of findings obtained from different sources, and the use of semi-quantitative methods in order to increase validity in qualitative research. In this context, various strategies were adopted in the current research to ensure validity. First of all, interviews with administrators, academic staff, evaluators and students were spread over a long period during the data collection process, thus ensuring a deep penetration into the research environment (long-term and intensive participation). The interviews were conducted with four different groups, and each interview produced approximately 7-8 pages of transcript data; a total of over 500 pages of raw data were obtained. In addition, a large number of documents on Official Gazette and EPDAD's official websites were examined within the scope of document analysis, providing data diversity (comprehensive and diverse data). In the research, it was aimed to address the research topic from different perspectives by interviewing participants from

different institutional structures. Similarly, information obtained from various sources was analysed comparatively during the document analysis process (use of multiple data sources). Thanks to the diversity of participants, it was possible to include opposing or alternative views in the scope of the research. Finally, while interpreting the findings, it was aimed to present the qualitative findings obtained more clearly and understandably by including basic statistical data such as frequency (semi-quantitative analysis). In line with these practices, the internal validity of the research was strengthened through methods such as intensive participation, in-depth and diverse data collection techniques, consideration of multiple evidence, and semi-statistical evaluations.

In order to ensure external validity (transferability) within the scope of the research, the findings obtained from the interviews and the data obtained from the documents related to the institutions were explained in detail so that researchers who want to conduct studies based on quality and accreditation processes can transfer them to their own studies. To ensure transferability in research, detailed descriptions are needed by researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because, thanks to detailed descriptions, inferences can be made about in which situations and contexts the findings are valid.

In order to ensure the content validity of the data collection tools (document analysis form and interview forms) used in the study, various expert opinions were consulted. To evaluate the structure and content validity of the document analysis form developed for the first and second research questions, the opinions of a program development expert and a language and expression expert were obtained; necessary adjustments were made to the form in line with the feedback obtained. In order to ensure the content validity of the interview form, which is the data collection tool for the third research question, the opinions of a total of eight experts, four from the field of education programs and teaching, one from the field of educational management, two from the field of measurement and evaluation, and one from the field of language and expression, were consulted; necessary improvements were made to the questions in line with the feedback obtained from the experts.

The main goal of the consistency review conducted regarding reliability is to reveal the extent to which the researcher behaved consistently during the research process (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). To ensure consistency within the scope of this research, regular information was provided to the members of the thesis monitoring committee, and the research was revised based on the feedback provided by the committee members. To ensure confirmability in the research, codes and themes were determined by the researcher for 10% of the obtained data and critical review meetings were held with three experts from the field of program development. In the critical review meetings, the codes and themes created by the researcher were discussed and adjustments were made to the codes and themes in question. After the critical review meeting, another expert from the program development field was asked to code 10% of the data to determine the reliability between the coders. Miles and Huberman (1994) state that the reliability between the coders should be greater than 80%. The reliability between the coders was calculated in the study in question and was determined to be 82%. With this method, an attempt was made to prevent bias that may arise from the researcher (Merriam, 2009).

The data obtained from the interviews and the codes and themes revealed during the analysis process were recorded systematically in a way that other researchers could examine, thus contributing to the internal reliability of the research. In order to increase external reliability (confirmability), the data analysis process based on content analysis was described in detail, thus aiming to guide similar studies. Document analysis was carried out using a pre-structured

document review form, and the obtained data were presented in detail with tables and figures. Detailed explanations regarding the process and the data collection tools used allowed the research results to be purified from subjective judgments and prejudices and to be placed on a more objective basis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Issues

To conduct the research, application permissions were obtained from Ankara University Social Sciences Ethics Committee with document number 35 and a permit dated 24.01.2022. Before starting the research, necessary permissions were secured from the universities where the research would be conducted, and the people with whom the interviews would be conducted were informed about the research. Participants were informed that the data gathered would be utilized exclusively for scientific research and that their identities would be fully protected.

Findings

The legal regulations in terms of quality assurance and accreditation in Türkiye

In line with the first research question, developments regarding legal regulations regarding quality assurance and accreditation in universities in Türkiye were gathered under the criteria of “year of publication, aim and scope”. These criteria and related findings can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Developments Regarding Legal Regulations

Name of the Regulation	Year of Publication	Aim	Scope
Regulation on Academic Evaluation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions	2002	To enhance the quality of educational and training processes within programs offered by universities.	Authorities, duties and responsibilities regarding academic evaluation and quality control
Regulation on Academic Evaluation and Quality Improvement in Higher Education Institutions	2005	To enhance and assess the quality of educational practices and administrative services in universities.	Duties, authorities, and responsibilities related to the evaluation of academic and administrative services in universities, as well as the development and approval of the quality standards for these services.

Table 2 (continued)*Developments Regarding Legal Regulations*

Regulation on Quality Assurance in Higher Education	2015	To establish the principles governing internal and external quality assurance systems for educational processes and administrative services in universities, as well as accreditation practices, and to define the duties and responsibilities related to the authorization of independent evaluation bodies.	Universities' educational, training, and research activities; the internal and external quality assurance of administrative services; accreditation procedures; and the approval processes for independent external evaluation organizations.
Law No. 2547 (Additional Article 35)	2017	-	Processes related to internal and external quality assurance, accreditation, and the approval of independent external evaluation agencies
Regulation on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the Higher Education Quality Council	2018	To evaluate the quality of educational processes, community engagement activities, and administrative services in universities in alignment with national and international quality standards, as well as to acknowledge and authorize independent external evaluation and accreditation bodies	Quality assurance mechanisms, both internal and external, encompassing education, training, research, and activities contributing to society

When Table 2 is examined, it is evident that there was no legal document regarding quality assurance and accreditation in Turkish higher education until the early 2000s. In Türkiye, quality assurance efforts have largely been confined to the national level until the early 2000s, and after actively participating in Bologna Process, it was realized that the priority issue to be developed in the Turkish higher education system was quality assurance systems (Deveci, 2012). However, as the demand for universities grew during the transition from an industrial society to an information society, the need to establish a monitoring mechanism to ensure coordination arose. Because the growth and diversification in higher education systems have shown their effects on many issues, such as students, education-training, administrators, and effective use of resources.

Following the developments in accreditation and quality assurance systems in Europe, it can be noted that the Turkish higher education system, which actively participated in the Bologna Process in 2001, was affected by these developments. In this context, the first regulation was issued in 2002 and aimed to strengthen the quality of education (Regulation on Academic Evaluation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions, 2002). The regulation issued in 2005 aimed to improve and evaluate the quality of education-training processes and administrative services in universities (Regulation on Academic Evaluation and Quality Improvement in Higher Education Institutions, 2005). The relevant regulation, prepared with the aim of determining quality standards in academic and administrative services provided

by universities and contributing to the harmonization process in the international arena, covers the principles regarding the recognition and approval of quality levels with the help of independent external evaluation. The regulation in question holds a significant position in the history of quality initiatives within Turkish higher education.

Among the notable advancements in recent years regarding quality and accreditation in universities has been the regulation issued in 2015 and the Law on Amendments to Laws and Legislative Decrees issued in 2017. In the context of these developments, THEQC was established and gained an independent structure in administrative and financial terms (CoHE, 2018). The regulation issued in 2018 was put into effect to evaluate the internal and external quality assurance systems according to national and international standards. From a historical perspective, it can be stated that this regulation was the first time in Türkiye that a program-based approach was adopted to accreditation processes. Considering that it is not easy to accept new concepts and tools in education systems, as in every field, innovative regulations such as Regulation on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the Higher Education Quality Council (2018) play a major role in the Turkish higher education system in order to use concepts such as program accreditation in different disciplines as a tool for improving quality in higher education.

The Institutional Structure and Functioning of EPDAD

It can be stated that, particularly in the early 2000s, the influence of Bologna Process significantly heightened awareness of quality assurance systems and accreditation within universities in Türkiye. During these processes, many institutions that took responsibility for program-based accreditation have been registered by THEQC, and one of these institutions is EPDAD. The history, its aims, commissions, its quality policy and international memberships (EPDAD, 2024) can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Information on EPDAD

History	Aim	Commissions	Quality Policy	International Memberships
Established on June 14, 2012, with the association's charter being approved.	Increasing the quality in teacher training processes Supporting the continuous development of teacher training institutions	Education commission Objection and complaint commission Quality assurance and continuous development commission Legislation commission Student commission	Assurance Continuous learning Service orientation Value creation Developing collaborations	Central and Eastern Europe, Network on Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

Table 3 (continued)*Information on EPDAD*

History	Aim	Commissions	Quality Policy	International Memberships
...	Supporting innovative studies increasing the awareness and value of accreditation Being an original model institution in accreditation processes	Standard and process development commission Strategic plan preparation and development commission International Relations Commission Distance Education Commission	Ethical behaviour Openness and accountability	...

EPDAD was established in 2012, aiming to be an organization that meets international standards in the accreditation of teacher education programs. The association began to take on a more institutional structure in the accreditation process after being officially recognized by THEQC with the Quality Assessment Registration Certificate in 2014 (EPDAD, 2024). The principle of “establishing member quality assurance systems in member countries,” one of the four fundamental dimensions designed to ensure the validity of diplomas within the European Higher Education Area and related fields, has undoubtedly played a significant role in the development of accreditation organizations and similar associations.

The emergence of accreditation organizations that provide accreditation within the framework of the standards determined by the regulations issued regarding quality and the increase in awareness regarding accreditation have yielded positive results. One of these organizations, EPDAD, has aimed to put evidence-based accreditation processes into practice and to make correct inferences regarding teacher training institutions. EPDAD carries out many activities to achieve the basic goal. Some of these activities are as follows;

- Accrediting teaching programs in universities upon application,
- Providing training services to those who will take part in evaluation teams in accreditation,
- Increasing the knowledge level of administrators and academic staff working in universities regarding program evaluation,
- Making international agreements and becoming members of national and international organizations to increase recognition,
- Leading national and international meetings such as seminars, conferences and workshops (EPDAD, 2021).

With the help of the commissions it has, EPDAD aims to not only determine the quality control processes of the institutions it conducts accreditation studies for, but also to establish an accountable system as an institution. To achieve these goals, the fact that different tasks and responsibilities are undertaken by different commissions plays an important role both in establishing the system as a whole on a solid foundation and in spreading collaborative working processes within the institution. It can be stated that EPDAD and institutions

conducting accreditation studies in higher education bear the responsibility of disseminating information about their activities to all stakeholders. In addition, the planning of information, documents and studies (statute, directive, training, evaluation processes, etc.) in the accreditation system by different units can be an indication that the wheels of the system as a whole work regularly.

The standards that form the basis of accreditation determine the activities that need to be carried out to establish a high-quality system. The standards determined based on the experiences, opinions and research of subject area experts serve as a guide in making decisions regarding programs in universities and in making accreditation decisions. In this context, standards in teacher education programs are the minimum set of features that programs should have to produce qualified graduates. In this context, the Workshop on Standards and Accreditation Process in Teacher Education in Türkiye was held and as a result of the relevant studies, teacher education standards were updated and three groups of standards were created: Initial, process and product standards. (EPDAD, 2021). The relevant standards are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Classification of Teacher Education Standards

Groups of Standards	Categories of Standards	Explanation
Initial standards Process standards Product standards	Teaching	It should be ensured that students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills required for their development.
	Faculty member	To provide academic and administrative services in universities, there must be sufficient numbers.
	Student	The program should ensure the enrollment of an adequate number of students who meet both qualitative and quantitative standards.
	Faculty-school cooperation	Adequate cooperation should be ensured between all stakeholders, especially practice schools and universities.
	Physical infrastructure, laboratory and library	Universities must have sufficient resources such as classrooms, libraries and laboratories, taking into account the number of students.
	Management	Establishing an efficient management system at both the faculty and rectorate levels is crucial for universities.
	Quality assurance	Quality systems must be in place in order for quality to become a sustainable phenomenon in the teacher training programs.

In teacher education, initial standards refer to the standards related to the inputs needed to train qualified graduates. In cases where initial standards are lacking, it will naturally be unrealistic to achieve process or product standards. Some of the responsibility for achieving initial standards belongs to universities and some to the Ministry of National Education. In this context, it is of great importance that the institutions from which teacher candidates will receive service and where they will serve after graduation continue their activities in cooperation in determining initial standards (EPDAD, 2016).

Studies on activities that should be carried out for teacher candidates to reach the required characteristics in teacher education processes are included among process standards. The quality of education, the organization of the content of education programs and having the required facilities while providing education services are included in process standards. The greatest responsibility for reaching process standards belongs to universities (EPDAD, 2016).

The levels that should be reached in teacher education systems can be defined as product standards. To reach the targeted outputs in teacher education for teacher candidates to be trained and graduated as qualified, input and process standards must be met in education faculties. Considering the idea that the most important product standard is to train qualified teacher candidates, it is extremely important to put quality processes into practice in teacher education institutions. It would be more accurate to describe standards as a set of characteristics that are effective in determining the indicators or evidence that can be used in the evaluation of practices rather than being a set of rules that only explain what teachers who will graduate should know or do.

The Opinions and Experiences of Academic Staff, Administrators, Students and Evaluators Regarding the Accreditation of Teacher Education Programs

The findings regarding the opinions of academic staff on accreditation are discussed under three themes: “necessity of program accreditation”, “effects of accreditation on teaching” and “areas for improvement in accreditation”. The opinions of academic staff regarding the necessity of accreditation are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Opinions of Academic Staff on the Necessity of the Accreditation Process

Necessity of Program Accreditation	f
Accountable system	14
Providing equal opportunities	12
Certification of quality	11

Table 5 (continued)*Opinions of Academic Staff on the Necessity of the Accreditation Process*

Necessity of Program Accreditation	f
Elimination of arbitrary practices	10
Reducing differences among graduates	10
Impact on institutional and academic autonomy	6
Ensuring standardization	6

When the findings regarding the opinions of academic staff on the necessity of program accreditation were examined, it was identified that substantial majority of the participants saw program accreditation as necessary. In this context, the participants stated that as a result of program accreditation, an accountable system would exist, equal opportunities would be provided to students, arbitrary practices would be eliminated, and differences between graduates would be reduced and a standard education would be achieved. For example, AS1 explained his/her thoughts on the subject with the following sentences: *"Through accreditation, the quality of the education we provide will also increase. In a sense, we will have certified this. And as we increase our quality, we will graduate better quality teacher candidates."* Similarly, AS14 emphasized the necessity of accreditation with the sentence *"To raise the quality bar in education and to register quality, institutions must provide education at certain standards and be accredited."* Despite these positive thoughts about the necessity of accreditation, AS17 stated the negative effects of accreditation by saying, *"I think I have lost my autonomy. After all, every academic has their own style. We can feel restricted because practices such as accreditation take away the autonomy we have."* In this context, some of the participants stated that the originality that should be inherent in universities was negatively affected due to accreditation practices in teacher education programs.

The opinions of academic staff regarding the effects of accreditation on teaching are presented in Table 6.

Table 6*Opinions of Academic Staff on the Impact of the Accreditation Process on Education*

Effects of Accreditation on Teaching	f
Training qualified teacher candidates	14
Ensuring quality in teaching	11
Standardization in content	9
Improving measurement and evaluation processes	7
Similar learning outcomes	5

When the opinions of the academic staff regarding the impact of program accreditation on education were examined, it was identified that the issues of training qualified students and ensuring quality in teaching were frequently mentioned. Participants mentioned that an

accountable system could be created through accreditation practices in teacher education programs and that qualified teacher candidates would graduate with a quality education-training service through this system. Some of the opinions obtained from academic staff are as follows;

AS4: "First of all, we can say that we provide qualified, quality education to our students who come to us in a documented way. In other words, we document that we train qualified teacher candidates due to accreditation."

AS8: "We believe that we can train qualified graduates through accreditation. Therefore, in this sense, of course, accreditation has also affected our education and training."

The opinions of academic staff regarding the areas for improvement in accreditation are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Opinions of Academic Staff on Areas for Improvement in Accreditation

Areas for Improvement in Accreditation	f
Unnecessary bureaucracy	12
High course loads	11
Lack of information	10
Resistance to accreditation	7
Too many academic studies	7

An analysis of the table highlighting areas for improvement in the accreditation of teacher education programs indicates that reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and workload emerges as a frequently emphasized concern. In addition, the participants mentioned that accreditation practices were a new practice for them and expressed that they did not know what needed to be done in the process and how to do them. The opinions of academic staff who have experienced or are experiencing the accreditation process regarding these practices may guide future quality-related studies. Some of the opinions obtained from academic staff are as follows;

AS2: "We are unfamiliar with these processes and I think it is very normal that we don't know what to do."

AS4: "I can talk about workload as a negative. Due to this unnecessary bureaucracy, workload should be reduced very quickly."

AS7: "The paper load should be reduced. In this way, this process, which seems like a chore in the eyes of people, can be taken more seriously."

The findings regarding the opinions of administrators on accreditation are discussed under three themes: "necessity of program accreditation", "effects of accreditation on teaching" and "areas for improvement in accreditation". The opinions of administrators regarding the necessity of accreditation are presented in Table 8.

Table 8*Opinions of Administrators on the Necessity of the Accreditation Process*

Necessity of Program Accreditation	f
Transparent management of resources	8
Planned and systematic operation	8
Standardization	7
Accountability	7
Participation of everyone in the process	6
Meeting academic expectations	6
Ensuring faculty awareness	5

It can be stated that administrators frequently mention the concepts of transparent management of resources, planned and systematic operation, standardization and accountability regarding the necessity of program accreditation. Administrators stated that accreditation practices in teacher education programs will make positive contributions to the transparent management of the resources of the programs. For example, A4 explained his/her thoughts on the subject with the following sentences: *“What are your available resources and how do you manage them? Revealing this transparently is an added strength for us.”* A8 pointed out the necessity of standardization with the sentence *“By getting an accreditation certificate, we ensured that the training we provide does not fall below certain standards, especially in terms of practice.”* In this context, the participants underscored the need for standardization in teacher education and highlighted the importance of establishing quality standards in specific skill areas to enhance the overall quality of the educational services delivered.

Table 9*Opinions of Administrators on the Impact of the Accreditation Process on Education*

Effects of Accreditation on Teaching	f
Ensuring systematic development	9
Achieving success and quality	8
Supporting students with feedback	7
Ensuring institutional development	7
Training qualified teacher candidates	6
Ensuring sustainability	5

As presented in Table 9, the most frequently emphasized concepts in the opinions of administrators on the impact of program accreditation on education and training are ensuring systematic development, achieving success and quality, supporting students with feedback and ensuring institutional development. Administrators mentioned that accreditation visits transformed both institutional and individual development processes into a systematic form and the quality of teaching services would increase due to accreditation practices in teacher education programs and that this would naturally affect both individual and institutional success. Some of the opinions obtained from administrators are as follows;

A1: *"When you look at all that has been done, it is clear that our success will increase and our quality level will rise, both individually and institutionally."*

A4: *"With accreditation, we were able to provide our faculty members with an effective and timely feedback system to our students."*

A9: *"In summary, we cannot ignore the impact of accreditation visits on the holistic development of the system."*

The opinions of the administrators on the areas that need to be developed in program accreditation were examined and the findings obtained from these opinions are quantified and presented in Table 10:

Table 10*Opinions of Administrators on Areas for Improvement in Accreditation*

Areas for Improvement in Accreditation	f
Lack of ownership of accreditation	7
Failure to inform stakeholders	5
Lack of knowledge of the purpose of accreditation	4
Excessive documentation	4
Lack of educational support	3

In order for the quality and accreditation studies in teacher education programs that emerge in line with current trends to achieve their goals, ensuring that individuals who will actively be involved in the process possess a high level of readiness is of critical importance. However, administrators mentioned that the level of readiness of faculty staff in accreditation practices was quite low. For example, A4 mentioned that the awareness level of faculty stakeholders in accreditation processes is low with the sentence *"The readiness of faculty stakeholders in this regard is at a very low level. I think this needs to be addressed first."* Although information meetings, which can be considered as the starting point of accreditation studies, are important in terms of faculty staff taking ownership of the processes in which they will actively take part and creating a quality culture, A5 expressed the deficiency in this regard with the sentence *"The accreditation body should support the applicant programs in terms of orientation with seminars or information meetings."*

In the context of the third research question, students studying at Educational Sciences/Faculties of Education were asked whether they knew that the programs they studied were accredited and, if they knew, where they learned this from. The answers given by the students on this issue can be found in Table 11.

Table 11*Findings Regarding Students' Knowledge of Their Programs' Accreditation Status*

I know that my program is accredited.	Yes	14
	No	10
	Total	24
Source for knowing your accreditation status	Web page	5
	Academic staff	4
	Brochures	2
	Administrators	2
	Preference guide	1
	Total	14

Fourteen of the students interviewed stated that they knew that their programs were accredited. The students stated that they learned that their programs were accredited from the programs' websites, faculty members, brochures and administrators. The teacher candidates who criticized the lack of information about the accreditation of their programs pointed out that the institution's administrators and academic staff have responsibilities in this regard. The fact that a significant portion of the interviewed teacher candidates do not know that their programs are accredited can be described as an important problem in creating a quality culture and awareness of quality in institutions. In addition, students were asked questions about how the accreditation process affected the learning process. The findings obtained from these opinions are quantified and presented in Table 12:

Table 12*Students' Opinions on the Impact of the Accreditation Process on the Learning Process*

Effects of Accreditation on Learning	f
Systematic operation	8
Supervision of educational services	7
Training qualified teacher candidates	6
Supporting student-centred education	5
Supporting the institutional structure	3
Lack of impact on professional development	2

When Table 12 is examined, the most frequently emphasized reason by teacher candidates regarding the effect of program accreditation on the learning process is systemic operation. Students stated that significant improvements were made in the learning-teaching processes with accreditation practices and that a high level of harmony was ensured between all elements of the programs and a systematic operation was established. Another crucial issue

stated by students is that the evaluation of the compliance of the services provided with the standards and the revealing of the existing situation are important in the context of putting a controllable system into operation due to accreditation. Despite all these positive thoughts, some of the students emphasize the importance of a quality education system that takes current developments into account in the learning process, but they approach external evaluation systems such as accreditation critically. Some of the students' opinions on this issue are as follows;

S9: "But many systems in our country, especially the education system, are very bad. We can fix the system with accreditation. It can have a more systematic operation."

S14: "I want to get the most out of every course. I want to learn something from every course. But of course I can't learn. So what will they say when we are appointed? They will say, "You graduated from an accredited university, let's appoint you directly."

The findings regarding the opinions of evaluators on accreditation are discussed under two themes: "The quality of EPDAD evaluator training and areas for improvement in accreditation". The opinions of evaluators regarding the quality of EPDAD evaluator training are presented in Table 13.

Table 13

Opinions of Evaluators on the Quality of EPDAD Evaluator Training

The Quality of EPDAD Evaluator Training	f
Lack of implementation	8
Qualified trainers	7
Online trainings	5
Concrete examples	4
Quality educational materials	3
Unprepared for extraordinary developments	3

According to the evaluators, the most important problem in EPDAD training is the lack of application. EPDAD evaluator trainings are carried out for evaluators to know the principles in terms of their scope and quality. Although it is an important requirement for the theoretical knowledge to be transformed into practical application, as in every education-training process, in order for these trainings to achieve their purpose, a significant number of participants stated that there are deficiencies in this regard. Despite this shortcoming, several evaluators highlighted the qualifications of the educators participating in the accreditation-related training processes, emphasizing that their expertise significantly contributes to the systematic and effective execution of the planned studies. In addition, although EPDAD training could not be held face-to-face due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the rapid reaction to continuing the training

online was perceived positively by some participants. Some of the opinions obtained from evaluators are as follows;

E3: "I think that evaluation training should be more practice-oriented. For example, it should be a training based on a case study."

E4: "When you look at the background of our instructors who provide these trainings, you can see how important their background and experience are. This made the training processes quite efficient."

E1: "The trainings were conducted in detail, taking into account developments such as the pandemic. They were transformed into an accessible format."

The opinions of the evaluators on the areas that need to be developed in program accreditation were examined and the findings obtained from these opinions are quantified and presented in Table 14:

Table 14

Opinions of Evaluators: Areas for Improvement in Accreditation

Areas for Improvement in Accreditation	f
Complex accreditation standards	7
Insufficient accreditation period	5
Lack of information	4
Lack of financial return	3
Problems arising from academic titles	2

The accreditation system in EPDAD teacher education programs consists of three main stages: pre-visit, field visit and post-visit. As can be seen in the findings in Table 14, the evaluators expressed their opinion that the time in accreditation activities was insufficient. Evaluators stated that the field visits were carried out in a very short time, which created a very busy working environment, and therefore, the field visits were not carried out in accordance with their purpose. One of the striking findings from the interviews was that some of the evaluators mentioned that their financial gains from the institutions they worked for were cut off when they participated in accreditation activities. Another problem encountered in EPDAD accreditation visits is that the differences in titles between the evaluators and the academic staff working in the evaluated programs prevent an objective evaluation. Two of the evaluators stated that when they went to accreditation visits in programs that wanted to be accredited, some experienced academic staff working in the relevant institution treated them as if they were inexperienced, and that this situation resembled a top-down relationship. Some of the

evaluators' opinions on what issues need to be improved in program accreditation in teacher education programs are as follows;

E1: "Time constraints were much more of a problem. For example, I would have liked to have observed more lessons during the visit. We did our jobs in a rush and I think this affected reliability."

E12: "When I go to accreditation visits, it does not provide you with a certain gain financially. Therefore, I also lose financially."

E3: "The age and title difference between me and the faculty members in the department. They may come across as more experienced, more seasoned and older than me. Their perspective on you may be a little more like you are inexperienced, less experienced."

Conclusion, Discussion and Implications

The rapid increase in the number of higher education institutions and the student population receiving education in these institutions, the significant impact of private education in particular on this growth, and dynamics such as the increasing institutional autonomy of state universities have brought the issues of quality assurance of higher education systems to the agenda in many countries. In addition, the increase in international student mobility, the spread of cross-border higher education activities, and the prominence of the free movement of services in the context of the globalizing economy have made the issue of quality assurance an important issue not only at the national level but also at the international level. In this context, the mutual recognition of diplomas and accreditation processes have become one of the priority areas of discussion in bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Since the 1980s, almost all industrialized countries have established "National Quality Assurance Agencies" to ensure quality assurance in higher education. The vast majority of these agencies are financed by public resources, but they operate structurally independent of the state and autonomously (CoHE, 2007). In addition, significant progress has been achieved in quality assurance and accreditation through regulations introduced since 2002 in Türkiye. In line with this, Deveci (2012) highlighted that prior to the adoption of Bologna objectives in 2001, quality assurance efforts in Turkish higher education remained largely national in scope. It is evident that Bologna Process brought quality assurance systems to the forefront as a key area for development. Until the late twentieth century, higher education primarily emphasized quantitative growth; however, with the advent of Bologna Process, the focus shifted towards a quality-centred approach, leading to the implementation of quality assurance and accreditation regulations in Turkish higher education.

Considering that it is not easy to adopt new concepts and new tools, it can be seen from the improvements in the regulations that the quality in universities cannot be increased with the relevant regulations alone and that this effort requires continuity (Özer et al., 2011). The legal independence of THEQC in 2017 and the authorization of program-based accreditation institutions supported the acceleration of the accreditation process. In parallel with this development, it can be stated that the inclusion of information about accredited programs in the preference guides in 2016 increased the interest of institutions in accreditation processes. It can also be concluded that the awareness of many universities regarding quality has increased, and program accreditation studies have become widespread in different disciplines.

Considering that accreditation institutions can provide significant benefits in ensuring the continuity of service quality in universities, it can be stated that the subject of accreditation has become widespread and diversified in different disciplines in Türkiye. The external

evaluation process at the program level has been instrumental in promoting the internalization of a quality culture within universities (THEQC, 2020). This development has resulted in a growth in the number of program accreditation bodies and reinforced ongoing efforts to uphold accreditation processes.

In teacher education, accreditation studies related to increasing quality and efficiency, where program standards are at the forefront, are carried out by EPDAD in Turkish higher education. When the EPDAD standard fields developed to conduct accreditation studies in teacher education programs are examined, it can be stated that these standards are a set of rules that will contribute to increasing the efficiency of education services rather than controlling teacher training institutions, academic and administrative personnel. When the standards in teacher education created by EPDAD are examined, it is determined that these standards consist of seven different fields and are located under three different groups as initial, process and product. Initial standards in teacher education express the standards related to the inputs needed to train qualified graduates. In cases where initial standards are missing, it will naturally not be realistic to reach process or product standards. Studies related to the activities that should be carried out in teacher candidates to reach the required characteristics in teacher education processes are among the process standards. The quality of education, the structuring of educational program content, and the provision of necessary resources and opportunities in delivering educational services are integral components of process standards. The levels that should be reached in teacher education systems can be defined as product standards. To achieve targeted outcomes in teacher education, that is, to train qualified teacher candidates and graduates, input and process standards must be met in education faculties. Considering the idea that the most important product standard is to train qualified teacher candidates, it is extremely important to implement quality processes in teacher training institutions.

It is concluded that participants from different groups have positive or negative perceptions of the accreditation of teacher education programs. The similar thoughts of academic staff and administrators that the quality of education can be increased and an accountable system can be established through accreditation studies can be accepted as an indicator that awareness of accreditation has been created in both administrative and academic staff in education faculties. However, there are also some studies in the literature where faculty members have negative thoughts about accreditation (Erkuş, 2009; Rippin et al., 1994; Talbot, 2016). In this context, in this study, important findings such as reducing course load, lack of information, unnecessary bureaucracy, workload, resistance to accreditation, and not being able to master the process were obtained in the theme of issues that need to be developed in program accreditation. This result of the study supports the fact that strategies related to the accreditation process of teacher education programs are still not being used effectively. Zineldin et al. (2011) stated that universities cannot structure their quality and accreditation management processes effectively and that this process needs to be redesigned creatively.

Another finding of the study highlights the academic staff's workload as a challenge within the accreditation process. In the study conducted by Erkuş (2009), the academic staff were undecided about whether they were in sufficient numbers to continue accreditation practices. Considering that the high number of students per academic staff also causes an increase in the course load (Erkuş & Özdemir, 2010), it can be considered that this situation constitutes a significant problem in accreditation studies. In this direction, it was concluded that the effort required to meet the program standards established by accreditation institutions may be interrupted due to the workload of the academic staff.

Administrators perceive accreditation studies as an important tool for transparent management of resources and accountability. Administrators stated that due to accreditation practices, the resources of the programs can be managed transparently, and an accountable mechanism can be established. Eaton (2011) argues for the establishment of accountability systems within higher education programs, emphasizing that accreditation practices, through the external evaluation of institutions or programs, can effectively promote accountability. Academic staff and administrators have expressed the view that there is resistance to accreditation due to the lack of information and the intensity of documentation in the accreditation process. In this context, it has been concluded that informing those who will take an active role in order for quality and accreditation studies in teacher education programs to achieve their goals affects the quality of accreditation studies. The reason behind this opinion of the administrators is that the lack of information and the intense documentation process in accreditation cause accreditation not to be seen as a need. This result of the research is parallel to the study conducted by Alpaydın & Topal (2022), who stated that the burden of paperwork and filing causes a significant problem in accreditation.

Students, as key stakeholders of universities, can access information about their programs' accreditation status through various sources, including websites, academic staff, brochures, administrators, and preference guides. In parallel with the results of studies indicating that students are one of the basic components of quality assurance studies (Jackson & Helms, 2008; Sarrico et al., 2010; Zou et al., 2012), it is striking that students are aware of accreditation activities in this research. An evaluation of student perspectives reveals that accreditation significantly influences the quality of the learning process, particularly in preparing well-qualified teacher candidates. Research on students' perceptions of quality in universities, particularly within faculties of education (Demirhan-Yüksel, 2011; Dicker et al., 2017), highlights the prominence of education quality as a priority. In this context, accreditation efforts can be regarded as a driving force for establishing a foundation for sustainable development in universities. Additionally, some students participating in the study noted that accredited programs place greater emphasis on student-centred education and training processes. To guarantee quality assurance, Bradbury (2013) emphasizes the importance of determining the learning profile of each student, thus reflecting their individual needs and thus developing improvement suggestions. In this context, as a result of the change and transformation experienced in education programs, it has been concluded that supervisory mechanisms such as accreditation can contribute to the efforts to implement student-centred education programs.

EPDAD trainings are given by experts in the field with concrete examples. Considering that no accreditation system can be better than the qualifications of the evaluators (Kavak, 1999), the existence of educated and qualified evaluators who can play an active role in accreditation studies can be considered as system advantages. Despite the positive aspects of evaluator training, it was concluded that some academic staff approach these trainings critically. Although supported by concrete examples, it was concluded that evaluator trainings were deficient in terms of practice. In this context, it is an important requirement for the trainings to serve their purpose to transform theoretical knowledge into practice. Another issue that needs to be improved in the EPDAD evaluator system is that the documentation process causes workload for academic staff. It was concluded that in the accreditation studies, which they participated in completely voluntarily, academic staff had difficulties due to the workload in their own institutions as well as the documentation in accreditation. It was revealed that some of the evaluators described the accreditation process as a bureaucratic and complicated process due to the intensity of documentation.

The fact that some academic staff who serve as evaluators feel disadvantaged due to differences in their titles has revealed that the awareness of the academic staff of some programs applying for accreditation is not at a sufficient level regarding accreditation. Similarly, Fidan et al. (2022) stated that the previous habits of academic staff create resistance in the accreditation process and that they describe the tasks assigned to them as drudgery. In this context, it has been concluded that disagreements may occur between academic staff and evaluators due to the increasing workload and differences in titles in accreditation processes. It has thus been concluded that the success of the accreditation process relies on the active engagement and acceptance of the process by all academic and administrative staff, students, and evaluators.

Considering the findings and results obtained from the experiences of faculty members, students, administrators and evaluators, who are the most important stakeholders of accreditation activities, recommendations have been developed for researchers, practitioners and accreditation organizations who want to conduct studies on quality assurance and accreditation in higher education institutions.

-Comparative research on accreditation can be conducted with participants from accredited and non-accredited programs within a representative sample of education faculties in Turkish higher education.

-Problem-based research can be conducted on the most common problems encountered in accreditation systems.

-Research can be conducted to compare how stakeholders in accredited teacher education programs and accredited programs in different disciplines experience the accreditation process.

-Providing information to all stakeholders regarding the accreditation process can contribute to the more effective continuation of activities carried out within the scope of quality assurance.

-Considering that the density of documentation creates resistance to accreditation efforts, recording and archiving documents related to all scientific and social activities carried out in the programs can prevent problems encountered in accreditation activities.

-In order to raise awareness about quality and accreditation studies, informative and encouraging activities can be organized in cooperation with CoHE.

-Carrying out accreditation visits and activities to be carried out during this process over a longer period of time in order to obtain sufficient scientific and reliable data may contribute to the system.

-Establishing continuous communication between the stakeholders of the program to be accredited and the accrediting institution and organizing information meetings by the accrediting institution can contribute to the internalization of the process.

-Informative meetings can be held by EPDAD to ensure that the title differences between the evaluators and the evaluated faculty members do not disrupt accreditation practices.

-There is a shortage of experts in the field of curriculum and instruction in the EPDAD evaluator pool. In this context, enriching the EPDAD evaluator pool in terms of quality and quantity may yield positive results.

-The needs of external stakeholders can be taken into greater consideration when establishing program standards in the accreditation process.

Contribution Rate of the Researchers

The study originated from the doctoral thesis prepared by the first author under the supervision of the second author

Statement of Conflict of Interest

This study has no financial conflict of interest with any institution, organization or person.

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