# Chapter 60
# Cultural Diversity and Accreditation:
## A Shared Understanding of Quality

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## ABSTRACT

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

## INTRODUCTION

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

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

## STANDARDS FOR ACCREDITATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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

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

An indicator for growing interest in external evaluation and accreditation may be the evolution of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and its growing membership since 1991 (Lewis, 2016). Today the association has 280 members around the world with the objective of developing the theory and practice of quality assurance in higher education through the collaboration of an international community of quality agencies. QA is an embracing term that covers all policies, processes and actions to maintain and develop the quality of an higher education institution. Accreditation on the other hand, refers to a form of quality assessment which involves a binary (yes/no) decision and a special status granted to an institution or program. In certain cases where programs lead

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