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Accreditation in e-learning: North Cyprus higher education case

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Abstract

The impact of the e-learning and European Union’s education programmes on curriculum development is expected to increase the contribution on the accreditation and evaluation process. The purpose of this study was to provide an overview of accreditation activities and quality assurance of e-learning providers in North Cyprus in order to reveal achievements, deficiencies and trends. A pilot qualitative research model was carried out only by senior executives. The multiple data were collected by self reports, research observation rating scaling, and in-depth interviews. Preliminary results have indicated that accreditation is not taken for granted in North Cyprus e-learning systems yet.

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Keywords: E-learning; accreditation; North Cyprus; Higher Education; E-xcellence.

1. Introduction

The impact of the e-learning and European Union’s education programmes on curriculum development is expected to increase the contribution on the accreditation and evaluation process (Barron, 2000; HECTIC Report, 2002). Due to Bologna process (Bologna Report 1999) and increasing partnership between institutions on higher education, increase the attraction of researchers to focus on this subject. Bologna objectives (e-Bologna) are bound to be a core approach in most courses and curriculum. European Council in Lisbon in March 2000, set an ambitious target for Europe to become within ten years “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (SEC (2003) 905). E-learning helps us to answer this request as an opportunity for increased quality, convenience, diversity and effectiveness. E-xcellence is the project that EADTU (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities) has started in January 2005 with the support of the e-learning programme of the European Commission to create standards of excellence in e-learning in terms of assessment tool, improvement tool, and tool for accreditation for excellence. MENU (Model for a European Networked University for e-learning) encompasses two national virtual universities in Finland and Norway, together with six national partners (Ure, O.B. 2003). In many universities e-learning projects rely on a decentralised strategy for accreditation. Divergent national systems were mentioned as a drawback when developing translational e-learning modules. Obstacles encountered in the thematic development of

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e-learning projects in the universities. Among them the lack of independent expertise for assessment of commercial e-learning platforms is the most important one. Due to the harmonization and equivalence of education for adaptation of the system thought the world, demand for an e-learning accreditation is an important research topic.

In North Cyprus, adaptation of EU’s higher education program and regulations to higher education systems is also started in 2005. Higher Education Planning, Evaluation, Accreditation and Coordination Council YODAK play an important role in this adaptation process. Under political difficulties YODAK concentrate its efforts for harmonizing university education in North Cyprus with EU’s Higher Education program to become a member of the Erasmus University Charter (EUC) and European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA). However neither EUC nor the Bologna process has been enlarged to the North Cyprus universities. In 2007, associate status was granted to the YODAK by the ENQA for better cooperation. The accreditation process was not started by YODAK so far.

This study bridge the gap by developing a better learning outcomes to achieve aims such as promoting, standard setting, evaluation and consultation processes, development and maintenance of higher educational, ethical and business standards in education and training programs delivered through e-learning in North Cyprus Higher Education System. The purpose of this study was to provide an overview of accreditation activities and quality assurance of e-learning providers in North Cyprus in order to reveal achievements, deficiencies and trends. In regard to the research purpose, the researcher sought to find answers to the following research questions:

Q1.0 How does e-learning influence the academic world?
Q2.0 Have successful models for e-learning been implemented so far?
Q3.0 How sensitive is education experts in North Cyprus about need of an international accreditation in e-learning?
Q4.0 Are the e-learning courses offered by their institute were accredited or not?
Q5.0 Which criteria are relevant for the judgment of an accreditation?

2. Methodology

A pilot study was carried out only by senior executives. The participants are either head of administration or director of education institutes (e.g. professors, director of studies). The total number of participants is seven. One Vocational School director, one Distance Education and Research Center Director, two Professors who are head of departments, one president, and two vice presidents. They all fill responsible positions in universities that provide e-learning in North Cyprus. The qualitative research model was used. The multiple data were collected by self reports, research observation rating scaling, and in-depth interviews. Although this survey is exploratory and does not claim to give representative results, it indicates some current trends in accreditation of e-learning in North Cyprus.

3. Findings and Results

As the results indicate, the accreditation and standardization of e-learning programs in North Cyprus is not a common practice yet. The interviewees in this work emphasized that there is no existing accreditation agency for e-learning in North Cyprus. The Bologna process will create the need for such accreditation in the near future. This research study reveals that the e-learning program tends to stay at the beginning stage of the university’s organization structure.

The first question that was asked to the interviewees was how e-learning influences the academic world. The results show that, e-learning is not applied properly in the university and only blended learning system is used. The university did not apply for any kind of accreditation. The senior executives claim to have plans to have e-learning system accredited in the near future. As main reason for their reluctance, the senior executives name the following:

- No obligation up to now; but the Bologna process will create the need for e-learning accreditation in the near future.
- No existing accreditation agency for distance learning in our country.
There is no real e-learning course yet in our university.

Most of the participants know at least one accreditation body. These are mostly national accreditation agencies for Bachelor, Master and/or Ph.D. courses. The in-depth interview findings demonstrate that the most important criteria of accreditation judgment are quality and reputation and minor importance is the value for money of given accreditation.

Observed researcher findings related to the evaluation of accreditation activities of e-learning provider are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Evaluation of Accreditation Activities of e-learning Provider</th>
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<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
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<tr>
<td>01 How do you judge procedure of accreditation in general?</td>
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<tr>
<td>02 From your point of view, what aspects of accreditation do you consider to be important or less important?</td>
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<td>03 What should an accreditation audit?</td>
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<td>04 Which evaluation method would you prefer?</td>
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<td>05 Which kind of accreditation would you prefer?</td>
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<td>06 Which accreditation body do you prefer?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

These findings indicate that senior executives note two more aspects, which are of great relevance concerning the quality of accreditation: Accreditation has

(1) to take into consideration the accredited organization
(2) to set up criteria which are consistent and not contradictory.

The participants, furthermore, agree on pedagogical and didactical aspects of e-courses to be audited. Management and also IT infrastructure are often mentioned to be audited. Additionally, all of the interviewees had to decide on an accreditation object, would prefer both the institute and the course.

Regarding test-methods for accreditation, senior executives agree that combination of three given methods and especially some more methods are proposed by participants. Self-report results are given below for some methods:

- Course syllabus with course description, learning outcomes and level of the course;
- Interviews of staff in order to evaluate congruency with operative up to strategic level;
- Interviews with students, instructors, pedagogical staff after having done the course.

Based on in-depth interview findings, the majority of the interviewees argue for voluntary accreditation. Another argument is that in an initial phase of e-learning accreditation process a national approach could be helpful to move the topic ahead in terms of quality of education. In addition to this majority of the participants reported that on the long run e-learning accreditation should harmonize in international perspective.

In terms of accreditation bodies, majority of the participants prefer a non-profit accreditation body. A commensurate group of experts would prefer to be accredited by a state-run body. It should be noted that independence and objectivity are the main arguments for a non-profit or a state-run agency.
The in-depth interview findings reveal that, the accreditation procedure should take its time to collect all relevant information about the e-course or e-learning system, and mainly focus on the effectiveness of learning process. The main problems of accreditation given below:

- The evaluator’s pedagogical competencies should be as good as the e-learning provider’s pedagogical competencies.
- External evaluators have external criteria which sometimes do not fit with the realities of the institution.
- E-learning systems are quite new for most of the external evaluators, this cause problems and lead to inconsistent criteria.

Although this survey is exploratory and does not claim to give representative results, it indicates some current trends in accreditation of e-learning in North Cyprus.

4. Conclusion

Preliminary results have indicated that accreditation is not taken for granted in North Cyprus e-learning systems yet. As main reasons for their reluctance, the interviewees whose e-learning systems are not yet accredited by national and/or international bodies name the followings:

- No-existing accreditation agency for e-learning systems in North Cyprus.
- The Bologna process will create the need for such accreditation in the near future.
- The independent non-profit e-learning accreditation body should be established in North Cyprus.

This research suggests that further research studies on accreditation e-learning systems in North Cyprus are needed. Especially this study raises questions about requirements on the optimal accreditation. Additionally, due to the growing importance of accreditation, the reputation of body is predicted to become more important in the near future. The findings are expected to contribute for increasing the quality assurance in e-learning systems in North Cyprus.

References