Transnational Open and Distance Learning: A Framework for Turkey as an Importer Country

Serpil KOCDAR, PhD
Research Assistant
Anadolu University
Faculty of Open Education
Yunus Emre Campus
26470 Eskisehir, Turkey

Cengiz Hakan AYDIN, PhD
Professor of Open and Distance Learning
Anadolu University
Faculty of Open Education
Yunus Emre Campus
26470 Eskisehir, Turkey

Abstract

Transnational higher education has been an increasingly important phenomenon since the 1980's, due to globalization and the consequent international expansion of higher education institutions. Especially developing countries are mainly importers and these countries express their concerns about the liberalization of trade and cross-border movement of educational services due to not having adequate legal regulations. Despite some initiatives, the evaluation and quality control of overseas higher education providers is still very much at the formative stage. Moreover, the majority of the existing regulations encompass face-to-face education rather than ODL. In this context, the purpose of this study is to develop a recognition framework for transnational ODL practices appropriate for Turkey as an importer country by seeking the opinions of experts in the field of ODL and/or quality assurance/accreditation. The data were collected via a three-round Delphi study and a focus group interview. As a result, a framework was proposed for transnational ODL practices for Turkey as an importer country.

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

1. Introduction

Transnational education (TNE) has been an increasingly important phenomenon since the 1980's, due to globalization and the consequent international expansion of higher education institutions (Hopbach, 2010). In the document *Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education* created by UNESCO/Council of Europe in 2001, TNE is defined as "all types of higher education study programs, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based." It is sometimes referred to as *cross-border education* and it encompasses a wide range of modalities, in a continuum from face-to-face (taking various forms such as students travelling abroad and campuses abroad) to different forms of distance learning (OECD, 2005).

TNE has the potential to create further access to higher education and to offer increased opportunities for improving the skills of students, and the quality of higher education systems (Hopbach, 2010). However, the increase in cross-border education causes a new challenge and gap in terms of recognition, quality assurance (QA) and accreditation (Hopbach, 2010; Knight, 2007). Daniel (2006) states that with the phenomenal proliferation of national and cross-border open and distance learning (ODL) across the world, quality matters more than ever.

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Although some countries regulated these educational activities by law, there are many countries that do not have regulatory systems for foreign providers (Knight, 2007; Stella, 2007). Especially developing countries are mainly importers and these countries express their concerns about the liberalization of trade and cross-border movement of educational services due to not having adequate legal regulations (Hope, 2005; Knight, 2006). Despite some initiatives, the evaluation and quality control of overseas higher education providers is still very much at the formative stage (Chalmers & Johnston, 2012). Moreover, most cross-border higher education is delivered primarily face-to-face via branch campuses or partnerships with universities in most of the countries (Olcott, 2009). So, the majority of the existing regulations encompass face-to-face education rather than ODL. In most cases, recognition or accreditation criteria for transnational ODL have not been developed (Knight, 2007; Jung, 2005).

For instance, Australia, UK, USA, and Canada are major exporters of their ODL programs and they have regulations for exporting their programs while China, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia and Singapore are the major importers of these programs (Jung, 2005). In China TNE practices were regulated in 2003 by law. All foreign institutions should cooperate with a domestic educational provider in order to offer programs and they should be accredited in China.[1] In Malaysia, all foreign providers are subject to the same regulations as national educational institutions. Among these importers, Hong Kong, India and Malaysia have also exported their programs to some other countries such as Bangladesh, China, Indonesia and Sri Lanka (Jung, 2005). In India, Distance Education Council, which is the responsible body for QA in ODL, applies its own criteria for accrediting overseas providers (Latchem & Ali, 2012). Moreover, Indira Gandhi National Open University of India, being an exporter of its ODL programs has also set QA guidelines for exporting programs (Jung, 2005). However, few of the developing countries have established regulatory frameworks for transnational higher education (Martin, 2007).

In Turkey, foreign degrees and diplomas are recognized by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE). In 2009, CoHE amended its Conventional Higher Education Foreign Diploma Equivalency Regulations[2] and for the first time announced that degrees and diplomas received abroad via ODL would also be recognized under certain circumstances. Moreover, in November 2010, CoHE made an amendment again in the same document and announced the required conditions for the recognition of ODL degrees and diplomas in Article 10.[3] The Equivalency Committee of CoHE decides whether the degree or diploma is eligible for recognition after evaluating it according to the items in Article 10. According to this Article, the following requirements should be met in order to receive recognition for a foreign ODL degree or diploma:

- Diplomas received abroad via ODL should belong to the institutions/programs that have been accredited by the QA/accreditation agencies in the home country before.
- The educational institution should be recognized by the CoHe of Turkey.
- The degree or diploma should be eligible for applying for a further degree.
- The total credit of the ODL program should be equal to the total credit of the conventional type of this program in the same country.
- Outcomes of the ODL program should be equal to the outcomes of the conventional type of this program.
- The assessment system of the ODL program should be controllable.
- The language of the instruction should not be Turkish.
- The ODL program should be equal to the same type of the program in Turkish higher education system.
- The level of education and the field of study should be clearly identified.

Latchem and Ali (2012) state that national, regional and international bodies are seeking to ensure quality in conventional cross-border higher education. According to them, cross-border ODL clearly has great potential but there is still need for QA frameworks and guidelines for transnational ODL. Similarly, in Turkey, although the regulations for conventional cross-border higher education have been implemented for a long time, the recognition of cross-border ODL does not have a long history and there is a need for reviewing the regulations and guidelines regarding ODL. Latchem and Ali (2012) also stress the importance of cultural differences.

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[1] http://www.doj.gov.hk/eng/laws
[2] http://www.yok.gov.tr/content/view/631/lang,tr_TR/
[3] http://www.yok.gov.tr/content/view/478/lang,tr/

They indicate that cultural appropriateness, inclusiveness and acknowledging cultural, ethnic, social and linguistic diversity in teaching-learning processes should be taken into account as key performance indicators in assuring quality in cross-border ODL.

In this context, the purpose of this study is to develop a recognition framework for transnational ODL practices appropriate for Turkey as an importer country by seeking the opinions of experts in the field of ODL and/or QA/accreditation. Research question for this study is as follows:

- What can be the appropriate process in Turkey for the recognition, quality assurance or accreditation of degrees and diplomas received abroad via ODL?

2. Research Method

In the study, data were collected through a three-round Delphi study followed by a focus group interview in order to seek expert opinions.

2.1. Delphi Study

In the first phase, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through Delphi. Linstone & Turoff (2002, p.3) define Delphi as "a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem." Although the first applications of Delphi aimed to predict future, it changed in time and it began to be used in modified forms for various reasons such as planning, decision-making, problem-solving and evaluation (Delbecq, Van de Ven & Gustafson, 1975; Keeney, Hasson, & McKenna, 2001). It is a suitable method when there is incomplete knowledge about a problem or phenomenon (Garrod & Fyall, 2005; Hung, Altschuld, & Lee, 2008; Skulmoski, Hartman, & Krahn, 2007; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Keeney et al. (2001) state that Delphi method is based on applying a number of questionnaires iteratively; but unlike questionnaires, the Delphi aims to achieve consensus of opinion, judgment or choice. This is achieved through a series of rounds where statistical information about the given answers is fed back to participants using questionnaires.

According to Rowe and Wright (1999), four key features may be regarded as necessary for defining a procedure as a *Delphi*. These are: anonymity of the participants, iteration of the questionnaires, controlled feedback, and the statistical aggregation of group response. Anonymity provides each participant to express his/her idea independently without being under group pressure (Hung et al., 2008; Westbrook, 1997). With the iteration of the questionnaire over a number of rounds, participants have the opportunity to change their opinions and judgments (Hung et al., 2008; Rowe & Wright, 1999). Feedback mostly includes statistical information including aggregated group response (Mullen, 2003) and enables experts to review their responses in the context of the responses of other participants.

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

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

2.1.1.   Selection of Panelists for Delphi

Delphi panelists are selected according to their *subject matter expertise* so that they can contribute to the topic (Hatcher & Colton, 2007).

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

2.1.2. Delphi Process

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

First round: First round questionnaire usually consists of open-ended questions (Delbecq et al., 1975; Franklin & Hart, 2007). Therefore, a questionnaire composing of an open-ended question was sent to the panelists via e-mail and 16 experts responded to the questions in the first round. Responses given to the open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively by grouping and categorizing them into 4 sections. In order to provide reliability, another researcher coded the data and intercoder reliability was calculated as 93 % with the formulation suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Second round: In Dephis, the second and subsequent rounds consist of the questionnaires that usually include quantitative rating or ranking techniques and require quantitative analysis (Powell, 2003). For the second round, after evaluating the responses given in the first round, a questionnaire was developed consisting of 4 sections. In the first section, 8 different methods that can be used for the recognition of ODL degrees and diplomas received abroad were given and experts were asked to rank 3 of them which they most favored. In the second and third section, 13 statements were given and the experts were asked to mark one of the statements in a 5-point Likert type scale. In the fourth section, documents that should be required in the evaluation process of a foreign ODL degree or diploma were given and asked the experts to mark the ones they consider to be definitely required. In addition, by adding a *comment* section next to each item in the questionnaire, the experts were asked to make comments regarding the items in cases where they found it necessary. The questionnaire was sent online via LimeSurvey, which is an online questionnaire software. Consequently, 22 experts responded to the questionnaire in the second round.

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

Therefore, for the evaluation of the second round responses, frequencies, median and interquartile range (IQR) were calculated by using SPSS software to represent group opinion. In the analysis, the median shows the level of agreement at which half of the responses fall above and half fall below and the IQR is the absolute value of the difference between the 25th and the 75th quartiles (Sahin, 2010). If the IQR is low, it means that the panel is in agreement. In the study, the first criterion used to indicate consensus was a level of 80% which showed that more than %80 respondents rated 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale.

The second criterion was a median of 4 or above and an IQR of 1 or below. In other words, items with a frequency of minimum 80%, with a median of minimum 4, with an IQR of maximum 1 were considered to show consensus as shown in Table 1. As a result of the evaluation, in the first section of the questionnaire, 3 most preferred methods for recognition were determined; in the second and third section, 9 items out of 13 and in the fourth section, 10 items out of 14 remained below the determined consensus level and omitted.

Third round: A questionnaire consisting of 3 sections was prepared including remaining items for the third round. In the first section, the experts were asked to mark one of the three methods they preferred for recognition. In the second section, remaining 4 statements regarding recognition were given and the experts were asked to mark the importance degree of these statements in a 7-point scale, 7 indicating a criterion *very important*. In the third section remaining 4 items regarding the documents that should be required in the recognition process were given and the experts were asked to mark the importance degree of these documents in a 7-point scale, 7 indicating a criterion *very important*. Statistical information of the second round (the frequencies, the median and the IQR of each item) was given as feedback to the panelists. Also a *comment* section was added next to each item. The questionnaire was sent to the panelists via LimeSurvey. Consequently, 18 experts responded to the third round questionnaire.

The responses of the third round were evaluated according to the determined consensus criteria by using SPSS. For the third round, the criteria used to indicate consensus was a frequency of 90%, a median of 5 or above and an IQR of 1 or below in a 7-point scale as shown in Table 1. None of the items were omitted as all of them remained above the determined consensus level.

2.2. Focus Group Interview

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

2.2.1. Selection of Participants for Focus Group Interview

Participants of focus group interview were 21 academicians, who were experts in accreditation/quality assurance and/or ODL from 12 different universities in Turkey and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. They were selected through purposive and snowball sampling method. Firstly, several academicians who met the expertise criteria working in various universities were contacted as well as the Delphi panel experts via e-mail or phone. Consequently, 21 academicians, 11 of whom were the Delphi panelists, accepted to participate in the focus group interview.

2.2.2. Focus Group Interview Process

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

At the beginning of the interview, it was intended to conduct 3 different groups of interviews, each group consisting of 7 people, in order to get a variety of perspectives. However, the participants indicated that discussing the topic all together would be more effective than having 3 different groups as the recognition, QA and accreditation are novel issues in Turkey. Due to the preference of the participants, instead of creating small groups, a single focus group interview was conducted including 21 people. The focus group interview was conducted for 2 hours. This can be regarded as a limitation of this study because in the literature it is indicated that focus group interviews consist of 4 to 6 or 6 to10 people (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2002).

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

2.3. Trustworthiness of the Study

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

In the literature, it is accepted that the Delphi technique is as reliable as the other techniqes for forecasting, creating consensus of opinion, making decision, etc. (Paykoc & Ok, 1990; Ono & Wedemeyer, 1994). According to Fish and Busby (2005, p.250), "reliability between first and second questionnaires can be estimated by exploring the consensus rates of the respondents and if a reasonable level of consensus is produced on many items on the second questionnaire, it is likely that a researcher has adequately summarized the meaning behind responses of the first questionnaire." In this study, consensus was achieved on many items both in the second and third round. Moreover, Mitchell (1991) states that clarity of the items affects reliability of the results and suggests testing the questionnaires in advance. Therefore, in order to ensure the clarity of items, the questionnaires were checked by the experts in the field of assessment and evaluation and Turkish language. Besides, the questionnaires were applied to 3 people who have similar backgrounds with the panelists and revised before each round.

3. Findings

In this study, for the process of recognizing the degrees and diplomas received abroad via distance education, experts recommended the criteria to be developed by the accreditation agencies that will be established internationally and to evaluate diplomas according to these criteria. Another recommended option in this issue was the establishment of an independent commission which will assign a few reviewers for each of the application. In this regard, reviewers are expected to evaluate the application by using a set of criteria and the ultimate decision is supposed to be made by the commission.

In addition to these, the experts emphasized the importance of a reliable accreditation system of the country in which the degree or diploma received and they added that the ODL institution/program should be accredited in this system. Moreover, they recommended examining the appropriateness of the ODL program to the Turkish National Qualifications Framework, entry requirements for the program, objectives and learning outcomes of the program, course contents, the amount of credits that had been taken by the student, and the student's diploma and transcript.

Besides, they recommended to form a national database that includes foreign ODL institutions and accreditation agencies. They warned against the possibility of confronting fake students in ODL as well as fake diplomas.

So, they recommended to have criteria that inquire whether the student himself/herself completed attended the courses, completed the requirements of the courses and achieved the examinations. Therefore, they suggested determining a minimum score that the student should have in the national university entrance examination and inquire whether the student can speak the language of the country that the degree or diploma has been offered.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings and literature, in this study, evaluation process of recognizing the degrees and diplomas in Turkey received abroad via distance education is recommended to be carried out by an accreditation agency that will be established for solely ODL quality assurance and accreditation practices. In this regard, it is recommended to assign a few reviewers and establish a committee composing of these reviewers for each of the application. The reviewers are expected to evaluate the application via a set of criteria developed by the agency and the ultimate decision is supposed to be made by the committee. In addition to these, the ODL accreditation agency could promote regional and international cooperation and lead the development of a set of criteria that will be used internationally, in cooperation with the other national, regional and international accreditation agencies. The proposed framework is shown in Figure 1.

In the process of recognition, the evaluation committee could seek for the presence of a reliable accreditation system of the country in which the degree or diploma has been received and require the ODL institution/program to have been accredited in this system before. Moreover, it is recommended to examine the appropriateness of the ODL program to the Turkish National Qualifications Framework, entry requirements for the program, objectives and learning outcomes of the program, course contents, the amount of credits that had been taken by the student. Also the student's diploma and transcript can be examined by the committee.

In conclusion, QA and accreditation criteria for transnational ODL – exports and imports – is still at the initial stages of development (Jung, 2005), and as Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, and Belawati (2011) indicate that QA practices are affected by societal and cultural environments of each country, it was intended to develop a recognition framework for transnational ODL programs that meets Turkey's social, cultural and educational requirements by seeking expert opinions in this study. Cross-border operations require much more cooperation between the existing QA agencies (Stella, 2007). In the literature, it is recommended to make international attempts and to establish regional networks or to increase the number of regional accreditation agencies and to make them more effective (Knight, 2007; Stella, 2007). Another recommendation by Knight (2007) is that ISO standards or other industry-based mechanisms such as the Baldridge Awards might be applied or remodeled for cross-border education (Knight, 2007).

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Definition of Consensus

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

Figure 1. The Proposed Framework for the Recognition of Transnational ODL in Turkey
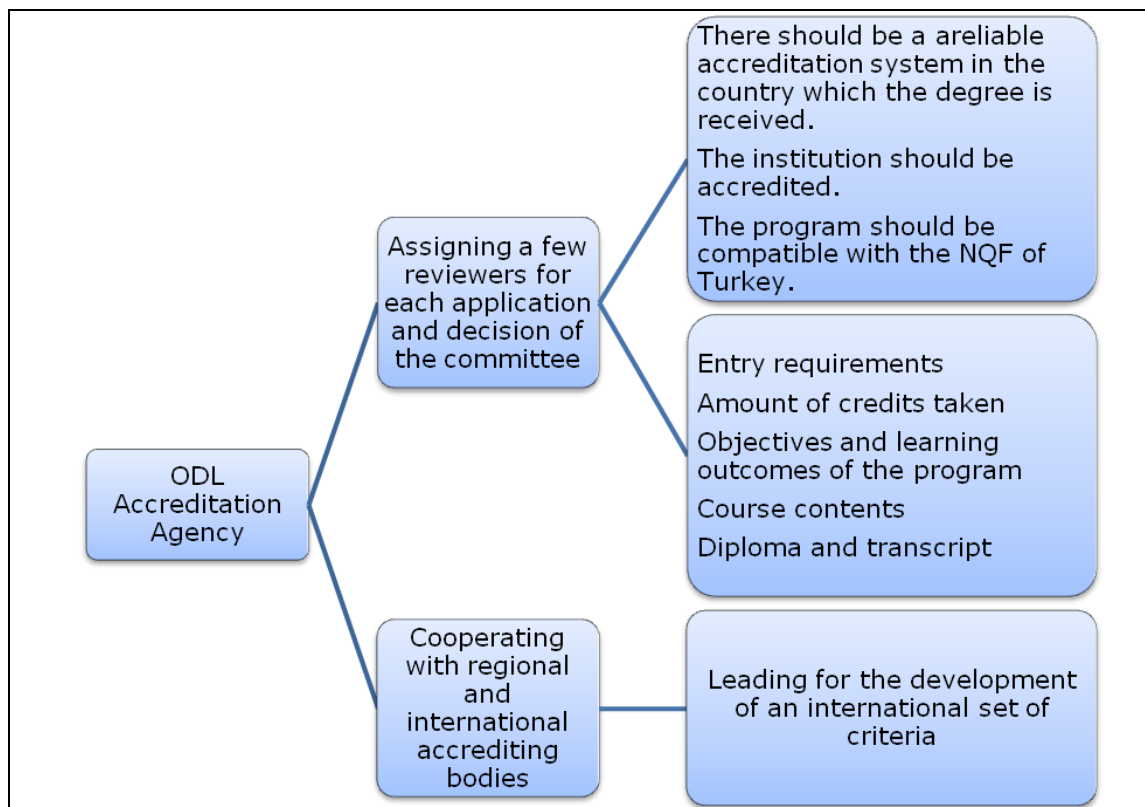
Authors Note: This study is the reviewed and improved version of a section in the dissertation "Accreditation of Distance Education Programs in Turkey Based on Expert Opinions", completed in the Distance Education Department of Social Sciences Institute at Anadolu University in 2011.

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