

Full Length Research Paper

The impact of the E- Learning in the light of the EU's higher education program and accreditation processes in North Cyprus higher education

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Information technologies, systems and intense competition are reshaping universities throughout the Europe. The purpose of this study is 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. As the result indicates, the accreditation of e learning courses in North Cyprus is not a common practice yet. 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 high educational, ethical and business standards in education and training programs delivered through e- learning.

Keywords: E-learning, accreditation, North Cyprus, higher education, excellence.

INTRODUCTION

It is expected that European higher education area (EHEA) will be created by 2010 for supporting Bologna objectives to increase the quality in higher education, competitiveness, attractiveness and improvement of e-learning. Bologna objectives are important for creation of the European higher education at all levels and in all domains both in mainstream continuing education, ensuring co-operation between universities. European union's higher education program (Erasmus) of which is supported with Erasmus university charter (EUC), curriculum development and diploma supplement is also expected to contribute the harmonisation of the university education, accreditation and evaluation process throughout the EU countries. Due to Bologna declaration of June 1999, the European education ministers identified 6 action lines in Bologna and they have added three more in Prague in May 2001 calls for the establishment by 2010 of a coherent, compatible and competitive European higher education area, which will become more attractive for European students and for students and scholars from other continents. Especially, some of the Bologna actions such as, adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, establishment of a system of credits, promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance, promotion of the European dimension in higher education is required to implement with compu-

ter and web based education network, which will contribute to harmonise the university studies within the EHEA for better adoption of above given actions throughout the Europe. Especially, the project E-xcellence, EADTU (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities) (January, 2005) has important role on supporting the e-learning project of the European commission for creating standards of excellence in e-learning, which is divided into 3 actions given below. These are:

- i) Assessment tool (program and institutional level)
- ii) Improvement tool (internal quality care system)
- iii) A tool for accreditation for excellence.

In the Bergen report (2005) cooperation with the European university association (EUA), European association of institutions in higher education EURASHE and ESIBÖ, stated that in the EHEA development of an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, accreditation and evaluation is required.

Achievement of these goals has also meant an enlarged computer network system (via World Wide Web pages) for better communication and information between universities, academic staff and students to harmonise the higher education for adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees throughout the

Europe. Due to this harmonisation and equivalence of education, demand for an e-learning becomes an important role as a tool for accreditation for excellence.

In TRNC, adoption of the EU's higher education program of the EU, projects and regulations in universities was also started by the ministry of national education and culture and by the YÖDAK in 2004. Between 2004 and 2008 I was in charge as a minister's advisor and representative in foreign affairs in the ministry of national education and culture, who joined several commissions as a member in YÖDAK and prepared several projects for adoption of the EU's education programs. Due to this reason several projects and measures have been put into effect for implementing EU's higher education program and harmonising the university education in TRNC with EU's higher education. Unfortunately, Cyprus problem, which prevents government authorities as well as in education matter and also in other socio economic matters to communicate and to co-operate with EU authorities for better adoption of EU's education programs, reduces the expected contribution of the EU's higher education program in universities in TRNC.

The aim of this study is to provide an overview of accreditation activities in TRNC in order to bridge the gap by developing a better learning outcomes and quality assurance in higher education.

Quality assurance in higher education and importance of e-learning in TRNC

In a globalize world it is also expected to enlarge harmonized higher education through out the world nations where different languages, cultures, education systems and learning methods maintain. Due to this harmonisation rapid growing multicultural communities, multinational companies, etc. become closer to cooperate and to understand each other. By doing this harmonisation and equivalence in education, people from different nations who became closer than ever to for several reasons such as work and study for same projects/ companies, communicate to reduce tensions between nations and develop similar goals for increasing the global welfare.

Above mentioned similar goals and reasons motivate EU countries to cooperate in many aspects. Of which one of these cooperation is realised in education. Also in TRNC similar reasons to rich the same goals force the higher education institutions to follow up the EU's education program to harmonise their education to the EU's higher education. Especially, higher education planning, evaluation, accreditation and coordination council-YÖDAK play an important role in this process.

The TRNC government have a great interest in the structure and quality of higher education institutions (HEI's) in North Cyprus. Due to this interest higher education council for planning, evaluation, accreditation and coordination- (YÖDAK) was established in 1993. And later YÖDAK law has been amended and put into force for

better adapting to the EU's education programs in 2005.

YÖDAK is an important asset for our region's higher education that increases competitiveness between universities and remains generally well regarded its reputation in evaluation and accreditation process for applied programmes at the universities. YÖDAK supports universities that establish clear priorities to improve graduate and professional education and research programs.

Below is an outline of the principles that guides YÖDAK on decision making process about higher education. These are:

- i) Higher education accreditation and evaluation is required for better student learning experience and securing the quality assurance in university education.
- ii) YÖDAK guides institutional appropriations for instruction, research and other activities contingent on performance and consider statistical and economical parameters for better estimating the number of students for each programme offered by the universities.
- iii) Implementation of the EU's Higher Education Program in North Cyprus universities and joining to the EUC, diplom supplement and curriculum development have the priority.
- iv) ECTS(European Credit Transfer System): Adoption to the ECTS for accreditation of the university studies,
- v) Promote higher education programmes that encourage instructors and researchers to form alternative programmes.
- vi) The staffs that run higher education should be accountable for performing their respective responsibilities. The YÖDAK do not manage academic operations but also set clear standards of accountability about the mission of higher education system.

Improving quality at the University education:

- i) Eliminate low-quality and low-priority programs and re-allocate resources to higher priorities and meeting student and North Cyprus needs through cooperative ventures. The YÖDAK decides if the University can be all things to all people.
- ii) YÖDAK develops a measurement system to evaluate the quality in all advanced degree programmes and then produce report cards for each programme, which can be used to reward programme achievement.
- iii) Strengthen advanced degree programmes by concentrating on areas that offer significant pay-offs for improved quality, such as, high admissions standards to advanced degree programmes and expanding grant programmes.
- iv) YÖDAK guides universities for improving human resource training and management programmes to unleash universities' human capital resources.

However the TRNC government's financial support to the YÖDAK and higher education institutions is rather low and not sufficient.

In the TRNC state's budget that is given to the higher education is fixed for each year. Of which a small amount is given to the YÖDAK for better evaluating and adopting the universities into the EU's higher education standards. This small budget is not only preventing the expected improvement in higher education but also reduces the possibilities for establishing proper e-learning centres in universities, of which is high technological equipments and labs etc are needed.

In fact, cost pressure on higher education sector continues to grow whilst isolation on the Turkish Cypriots and students stayed intact. Nearly, 10% of the North Cyprus budget is gone to the universities (salaries, projects support) and 10% is distributed as a direct student aid. The state's support that is given to the higher education sector is relative low compare to the outcome, which covers about 60% of the gross national income (GNI). Under such financial and political difficulties YÖDAK concentrate its efforts for harmonizing university education in TRNC with the EU's education program –to adopt Erasmus / Life Long Learning, to become a member of the Erasmus university charter (EUC), to join into the Bologna process and to become an associate member of the European network for quality assurance (ENQA). However, neither the EUC nor the Bologna process has been enlarged to the TRNC universities, because of the political issue, which prevents director general for education culture and training (DG 11) in EU to enlarge the programs into the universities in TRNC. The rejection of all efforts was dependent to the acquire-article 10, which implies 'until political solution relations with North Cyprus authorities will be suspended'. Nevertheless, after all our efforts with YÖDAK commissions one of the applications to become a partner for better co-operation and adoption of EU's programs was accepted by the ENQA. And in 2007 associate status was granted to the YÖDAK. After all these efforts for joining to the EU's education programme and Bologna process, the importance of the e-learning was neglected.

In near future it is expected that YÖDAK will consider e-learning as an important issue for quality assurance in university education. The reason of this expectation can be summarized with below given considerations. These are:

E-learning increases the communication and information of the people throughout the world countries.

E-learning contributes to increase the knowledge throughout e-library, e-study, E-research.

E-learning contributes to increase the students' awareness, on different countries education programmes.

E-learning increases equity in education and contributes to harmonize the curriculum development in similar disciplines in the EU level.

In this study importance of the e-learning is researched and impact of the e-learning on quality assurance for increasing the learning outcomes is questioned in the light of the above given considerations.

Globalisation and effects on education system in TRNC

Globalisation has inevitable economic, social, cultural, results on the world nations. The important effect of the globalisation can be seen on society's interconnection. Especially Internet communication between people in the world, web pages that offer instant access to institutions database one another, brought communities as well as TRNC people closer than ever. There are also worldwide enlarged e-libraries, e-learning, e-media/ TV communications etc. In addition to these computer/ web based communications there are also multinational companies Siemens, Philips, Mercedes, Ford, etc. and global franchising such as, Mc Donald's, Pizza hut, Coca cola, etc. and international social movements such as amnesty international, green peace, etc contributed to the globalisation. Consequently, increasing trend of globalisation compel TRNC authorities' to harmonise the education system to cover human resources of institution in and outside of the TRNC. The increasing knowledge based economies and knowledge gaps between citizens in TRNC and in other countries create difficulties and misunderstanding of people from different cultures and different nations. In such a global world where important changes are observed, such as:

- i) Global culture: most urban areas resemble one another,
- ii) Cosmopolitan culture: people are beginning to think globally and act locally,
- iii) Homogenous world: difference between people is diminishing,
- iv) Time and space seem to be collapsing.

It is not possible to maintain the traditional education and teaching methods; because, ideas of geographical space and chronological time are undermined by the speed of modern communication and information technologies. All these changes are required to harmonise the education system in TRNC with the EU education programs. However recent researches conducted that adoption of different education programs is dependent to reduce some problems, which are created by differences in countries. These are:

- i) "Problems of culture and environment,
- ii) Teaching style differences,
- iii) Problems relating to different educational values and culture,
- iv) Problems of language and semantics,
- v) Technical problems relating to platforms, operating, systems, and lack of standard interfaces." (Collis Parisi Ligorio M B: Adoption of course of Trans European Tel learning journal of computer assisted learning 1996, 12(1) 47-62)

In TRNC national education is focused on traditional, historical and national aspects. On the one hand traditio-

nal and historical background of elder people in TRNC, which is mostly supported by nationalist and conservative approach, increases the traditional education values and on the other hand people with global culture focuses on global education programmes, of which global standards and education values are highly preferred. Due to this division in education, problems are also created as above mentioned, such as, different teaching styles, standards, education in native or in foreign language problem, etc. Such differences in education create difficulties to integrate the TRNC education into the EU' education, several projects and programs have been proposed by different commissions (of which universities, YÖDAK, Ministry of Education and others) to harmonise the EU's education programs and projects in TRNC.

The project E-xcellence, EADTU (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities) is one of the important projects of European commission which has an important role on supporting the e-learning for creating standards of excellence in e-learning which will also support the accreditation and evaluation of university programs in the EU countries and especially in TRNC where the e-learning is still in a difficult and slowly growing process.

In near future, it is expected that awareness of TRNC universities on project E-xcellence- EADTU will increase to enlarge the e-learning program of the EU in TRNC.

E-learning versus teachers training

Many researchers agree that technology will never replace trainer or instructional designers, but technology brings with it more demands for teamwork and collaboration among a diverse group of workers (Wagner and Reddy, 1999).

Some lecturers in TRNC universities believe that lecturer roles in the class compare to the e-learning instructors have the advantage to communicate with his/ her students face to face. As a lecturer he/ she perform the lecture in the class as the centre of knowledge and learning. Lecturer advises on course exercises and revision. Lecturer writes course materials, exercises and auxiliary materials and develops overheads to perform lecture as much as possible intelligible. As a lecturer prepare handouts, produces the training materials, manuals, overheads, graphics. And lecturer has the advantage to teach and ask questions, discusses and get feed back in the class to increase the knowledge and/ or change the wrong belief of the students which is not possible via e- learning. As bakers suggests in his book tips for being a successful distance student (1995) that "distance learners should be more assertive in interrupting or correcting their instructors when he or she misuses the technology, even though this may be uncomfortable at first. Instructors must establish trust with distance learners by being open and honest regarding their level of skill with the technology, using humour to diffuse student anxiety, instructor need to set

ground rules during the first class meeting. Encouraging assertive behaviours by recognizing student interruptions and correcting audio and video problems as they are brought to the instructor's attention will serve the distance instructor and student both." (Baker M.H.: Tips for being a successful distance Student, Handout distributed at post conference workshop 11th Annual conference on distance teaching and learning, Madison WI, August 1995). However it is important to note that e-learning is required to become familiar with the computer/ web based communication and information system during the education. Therefore the administrative bodies and computer/ web based learning operators in universities in TRNC may ensure that distant sites are set up and operable. E-learning instructors may also assist other trainers with exercises, distribute work, collect materials and administer tests, exercises, to become familiar with e-learning.

In the last decade increasing role of computer/ web based knowledge, communication and information such as e-state, e-trade, e-media etc compel university education to combine university studies with the e-learning. As stated by Barron (2000). E-learning interventions are rapidly becoming organisations response to continuous learning and change in the new economy. Today organisations are in synch with and using content providers, authoring tools, training management systems, portals, delivery systems and integrated solutions to foster their e-learning endeavours. This is important because as companies digitally transform their businesses, knowledge and training become rapidly obsolete, just in time.

In addition, technology-enabled learning fundamentally changes the locus of control from the trainer to the learner. As Drisscoll investigates (1998) explained e-learners are mostly adult people, who work and study, according to her e-learners concentrate on a specific topics/ problems for achieving difficulties at work or to become expert in their field. The specific characteristic of e-learners includes:

"Have real life experience,
Prefer problem centred learning,
Are continuous learners,
Have varied learner styles
Have responsibilities beyond the training situation
Prefer to manage their learning." [Drisscoll M: Web based training: Using technology to design adult learning experiences, San Francisco, jossey –Bassy/ Pfeiffer 1998 (chapter 2 - 1.section)]

These characteristics of e-learners indicates that e-learning is especially suitable for specific group of people who have job experience with less knowledge but wants to increase their knowledge within a limited time.

Strategic importance YÖDAK in quality assurance and e-learning in higher education

This section concentrates on strategic importance of e-

learning in higher education, advantages and disadvantages of e-learning in quality assurance and effects on work life.

These pressures will intensify over the next 10 years, while new challenges are becoming evident in higher education in TRNC. These include an increased focus on accountability to students for the quality of the education and services they receive; the growing importance of e-learning; an increased emphasis on issues of wider participation, retention and graduate employability; the introduction of new forms of reporting student achievement; the quality of research training environments; increased competition from overseas providers; growing international perspectives on curricula and standards issues. The purpose of the e-learning is to support university education and enhancing the learning experience of students.

Universities provide a comprehensive, integrated and coherent focus on improving the student learning experience via increasing the standards of the university education. Higher education institutions focus on improving the student learning experience, undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate. YÖDAK recognise the significance of variety of institutional missions and believe that this diversity is one of the key strengths of the higher education sector. Being both receptive and innovative will be the central challenge YÖDAK must meet to be successful.

In the North Cyprus there is no other organisation of similar position and scope in the higher education. All higher educational institutions recognise the importance of YÖDAK work and they have all indicated initial support to its function. There is a substantial body of work in higher education in North Cyprus to build on and YÖDAK have highly capable and professional staff for implementing this duty. To exploit this strategic position successfully YÖDAK needs to be clear about its focus and priorities, demonstrate that YÖDAK's advices and support is well grounded and effective, be open, participative and consultative in its processes. YÖDAK will do this through the aims and objectives of the strategic plan and their detailed implementation.

The YÖDAK fulfil expectations of higher educational institutions

The YÖDAK intends to work with university and individual staff and other qualified experts to help them deliver the best possible learning experience for all students. YÖDAK will also cooperate with the related authorities in North Cyprus and their finance department to create the best policy environment to enable this to happen. Institutions can expect from YÖDAK to influence national policy on their behalf; to provide them with practical solutions and research evidence; to provide national recognition of the programmes, which they offer, to their students and staff and to supply continuing curriculum,

pedagogic and developmental support for their staff. Disciplines and subjects can expect YÖDAK to supply subject-focused support services via subject centres, to organise discipline networks and to provide advice, information and resources. Individual staff can expect YÖDAK to provide support and networking for teaching, learning and supervision through the subject centres; to facilitate their professional standing and professional development and to provide access to the best possible evidence about how to improve the student learning experience. Other Organisations and/ or institutions can expect YÖDAK to support collaborative activities; to provide strategic advice in a competitive international climate; to influence national policy; and to help build the sector's capacity for evidence-informed activities designed to improve the student learning experience. Government and finance department can expect YÖDAK to contribute constructively to the development and implementation of policy which influences the student learning experience and to use effectively the funds provided to us for this purpose. Students can expect YÖDAK to involve their national representatives in policy development and to put the student learning experience at the centre of its work. YÖDAK focus on increasing the student learning experience of institutions, which will lead institutions to work on all aspects of the student learning lifecycle, the effective uses of learning outcomes, e-learning at universities, the development of enterprise capabilities, and support for excellent research training environments. Underpinning YÖDAK work is a commitment to:

- I) Equality and diversity
- II) An international perspective
- III) Evaluation and Recognition of programmes
- IV) Transparency
- V) Partnership
- VI) Sharing good practice
- VII) Maintaining high standards of service.

Strategic aims and objectives

To be an authoritative and independent body on evaluating and accreditation process

- a. To become a reliable organ of North Cyprus for implementing the accreditation and evaluation of programmes.
- b. To facilitate the development and implementation of a standards framework for professional recognition.
- c. To accredit institutional programmes.
- d. To become a credible provider of opened programmes at universities.
- e. To become a reliable highest organisation in higher education sector.

To lead, support and inform the professional development and recognition of staff in higher education

- a. To develop accreditation routes for university staff,
- b. To support and inform professional development and recognition of university staff.

To be an authoritative and independent voice on policies that influence universities for providing student-learning experiences

- a. To become a credible provider of strategic policy advice,
- b. To establish relationships with universities to advice and influence public policy related to the student learning experience.

To support institutions in their strategies for improving the student learning experience

- a. To develop programmes of support based on HEI needs,
- b. To work with institutions in developing their capacity for institutional research (IR),
- c. To inform and advise institutions on issues concerning the learning experiences of diverse student groups including overseas students.

To promote good practice in all aspects of support for the student learning experience

- a. To work with the sector to provide high quality information, advice and support on curriculum, learning, teaching and student assessment,
- b. To be a key source of and ensure effective use of information and resources on academic practice and aspects of supporting the student learning experience,
- c. To promote best practice in the internationalisation of the student learning experience,

To lead the development of research and evaluation to improve the quality of the student learning experience

- a. To play a leading role in identifying research and evaluation issues relating to the student learning experience,
- b. To synthesise and disseminate information from research, evaluation and other sources about all aspects of the student learning experience,
- c. To provide high quality evaluation advice and services associated with improving the student learning experience.

To be a responsive, efficient and accountable organisation

- a. To ensure responsible use of resources,
- c. To deploy professional systems,
- e. To develop and implement a information and communications strategy.

Conclusion

Preliminary results have indicated that YÖDAK plays the major role on higher education accreditation and evaluation. But unfortunately e-learning is not adopted into the university education in TRNC. However some universities in TRNC prepare e-learning programs for near future. As main reasons for their reluctance, the interviewees whose e-learning systems are not yet accredited name the following:

- i) Not necessary up to now
- ii) No such tradition
- iii) There is no real e-learning course yet in our university
- iv) No existing accreditation agency for e-learning in North Cyprus
- v) The Bologna process will create the need for such accreditation in the near future.

The e-learning has the advantage of being anytime, anyplace for individual learners who are mostly work and study and has limited time after work. The e-learners understand that it is up to them to learn, not the teacher to teach. The e-learner group connected via internet is the centre of knowledge and learning. Against to this lecturers in the class are the centre of knowledge and learning. In the class there is an interactive lecture different approaches can be spoken, discussed and better understanding with different approaches offered to the students. But on computer/ web based learning this is not possible.

Abbreviation: **DG 11**, Director General for Education Culture and Training; **ENQA**, European Network for Quality Assurance; **EHEA**, European Higher Education Area **EUC**, Erasmus University Charter; **EU**, European Union; **EADTU**, European Association of Distance Teaching Universities; **EUA**, European University Association; **EURASHE**, European Association of Institutions in Higher Education; **ESIBÖ**, European Standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance; **GNI**, Gross National Income; **HEI's**, Higher Education Institutions; **TRNC**, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus; **YODAK**, Higher Education Council for Planning, Evaluation, Accreditation and Coordination.

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