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ABSTRACT

Due to increasing demand for higher education around the world, concerns regarding the quality of education in higher education institutions have increased. The aim of this study was to determine perceptions of accreditation self-study coordinators and programme administrators on the influence of accreditation on academic quality. Data was collected by means of a scale devised by researchers. To achieve this, a comprehensive literature review was conducted, a pilot scheme was administered, expert opinion and advice were obtained and validity and reliability studies were conducted. The findings revealed that accreditation contributes more to the improvement of processes and practices in institutions in operation for 1–20 years compared to those functioning for more than 41 years. Similarly, accreditation makes a greater contribution during the initial accreditation process compared to re-accreditation. Additionally, accreditation contributes most to importance attached to learning outcomes and least to the number of students who graduate from a programme.

Due to increased access to university as a result of globalisation, internationalisation and global competition, there has been an increase in social demand for higher education around the world (Knight 2007; Sanyal and Martin 2007). This resulted from the fact that globalisation contributed to removal of borders between countries, which in turn led especially developed countries to market knowledge they produced to under-developed and developing countries and thus contributing to increased competition among universities. So as to attract students, maintain their existing state and increase their efficiency in this era of global competition, universities started to adopt various approaches to prove their quality (Volkwein 2010). The quality of a higher education institution is regarded as an indicator of institutional performance and quality education and thus universities implement a variety of quality assurance methods to certify institution/programme quality (Dill et al. 1996; Knight 2007; Blanco-Ramirez 2015a).

With its emphasis on quality and excellence, accreditation is undeniably one of the most preferred methods of quality assurance (Yorke 1999; Kohler 2003). Accreditation enables higher education institutions not only to reach and maintain standards of quality but also to attract students (Dill 2007; Dew 2009). Establishing criteria for successful learning and transfer of credits between institutions, identifying institutions which meet quality criteria, providing access to state and federal financial assistance, assuring the quality of instruction of graduates and ensuring an institution's culture of continuous improvement may be counted as some of the benefits of accreditation (Garfolo and L'Huillier 2015). Despite those potential benefits it may provide to a specific

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programme or university, accreditation may not always be an actual indicator of academic quality (Leef 2003; Murray 2009).

Presenting evidence of student learning and growth is inarguably a significant factor in proving effectiveness and quality of an institution (Volkwein 2010). Although aggregate accomplishments of students in a programme are strongly associated with programme quality, whether accreditation is the appropriate tool for establishing the competence of any individual (Murray 2009) and how effective it is in improving academic quality (Saunders 2007) is questioned.

As accreditation is becoming more widespread across the globe in response to pursuit of quality as a reliable quality assurance mechanism for national as well as international institutions, there is a strong need to hear the voices of those having actively participated in accreditation processes in different parts of the world. There is little guidance in the literature concerning processes and practices that are improved as a consequence of accreditation within the scope of academic quality from an international perspective; in particular, relying on quantitative data. To this end, the current research seeks to address the following research questions: (a) How do accreditation self-study coordinators and programme administrators perceive the influence of accreditation on academic quality? (b) How do the perceptions of accreditation self-study coordinators and programme administrators differ according to country of the institution, type of the institution, the approximate age of the programme, the average number of students per class, the accreditation status of the programme, instructor's gender, instructor's nationality, whether the instructor worked as a self-study coordinator during the accreditation process, instructor's teaching duty, instructor's teaching experience, whether the instructor has an administrative duty, the instructor's administrative duty and administrative experience.

Theoretical framework and literature review

In the broadest sense, accreditation can be defined as a means for quality assessment (Jones 2002; Kohler 2003; Ginkel and Dias 2007; Skolnik 2010) and accountability against professional standards (Berry 1999; De Paor 2016). Recent trends in higher education such as internationalisation (El-Khawas, De Pietro-Jurand, and Holm-Nielsen 1998; Petersen 1999; Knight 2007; Yung-Chi Hou 2011), global competition (Lamico and Jensen 2003; Smith 2010) and university rankings (Salmi and Saroyan 2007; Bleiklie 2011) have all made a significant contribution to the recent popularity of accreditation.

Functioning as a mechanism for quality assurance and accountability in the USA (Provezis 2010), accreditation is a voluntary process and its current influence in the USA is based on the fact that national governments provide federal funds to universities based on their accreditation status (Dill 2007). In accordance with increasing demand for higher education especially after the Second World War, federal government started to increase the funds and loans it provided to universities so as to meet the demand. This required obtaining reliable information regarding academic quality status of institutions and programmes, which in turn led to the current state of accreditation in the USA (Ewell 1994; Sheahan 1997; Eaton 2003; Schray 2006).

Currently, US accrediting agencies are maintaining their regular accreditation activities within the country while gradually opening their doors to international institutions (Blanco-Ramirez 2015b), which connects them to a variety of higher education zones (Hartmann 2017). A great many international institutions outside of the country turn to US accreditation to continue to attract international students, mainly stemming from lack of a national quality assurance system in their own countries (Blanco-Ramirez and Luu 2016). They have established standards under such themes as student achievement and continuous improvement, curriculum, faculty, facilities, equipment and supplies and fiscal and administrative capacity (Wilkerson 2017).

Initially, accreditation put a great amount of emphasis on such quantitative factors as the number of books in the library and the student–faculty ratio (Harvey 2002; OECD 2009); however, when the conversation within higher education began to focus on outputs and outcomes, accrediting agencies

started to incorporate students' learning outcomes into their accreditation standards (Davenport 2001; Ruben 2007; Saunders 2007). Learning outcomes became an integral part of daily institutional discourse as a result of the changing focus in higher education (Blanco-Ramirez 2015a). However, as learning outcomes started to be criticised for difficulty of their assessment and their lack of influence on educational enhancement (Tam 2001; OECD 2009; Volkwein 2010), students' learning experiences as indicators of academic quality started to attract attention and the emphasis shifted away from students' learning outcomes to their learning experiences (Pascarella 2001; Tam 2001; Harvey 2002; Volkwein 2010).

As accreditation has been utilised as a means of quality assurance for many years, there is a wide range of research focusing on accreditation and quality. With regard to the contribution of accreditation to academic quality, there are a number of remarkable research findings: Accreditation protocols determine the weak areas to be developed effectively and this process has a potential in influencing student development in a positive way (Berry 1999; Saunders 2007). In addition, evaluation of learning outcomes and all the improvement practices to meet quality standards makes a significant contribution to student and school success and thus quality as a whole (Ferrara 2007). Meeting minimum standards is required for accreditation decision and teaching and learning are examined as indicators of quality in accreditation decisions (Saurbier 2013). Furthermore, the perception of insufficiency in meeting required standards for academic quality causes a decrease in the number of programmes applying for accreditation, which in turn increases the quality of existing programmes (Sin, Tavares, and Amaral 2017).

As for insufficiency of accreditation in improving academic quality, the following findings are noteworthy: Accreditation standards consider higher education as an industry and instead of measures to determine product quality, the standards focus more on processes and practices (Troutt 1978). Therefore, currently, the focus on issues concerning the actual processes of teaching and learning is insufficient (De Paor 2016). Also, many reputable institutions are insufficient in meeting the newly revised accreditation standards, which require a more comprehensive evaluation of learning outcomes (Mortensen 2000). In fact, it is possible to have a high-quality programme without being accredited (Galuski 2005).

Concerning the improvement function of accreditation, data collected during the accreditation process is not always used for improvement. Accrediting agencies do not have to publish statistics on student success including graduation and retention rates (Garfolo and L'Huillier 2015). Besides, not everyone gets involved in the accreditation process and not every student is developed by means of accreditation (Harvey 2004). Traditional accreditation has very little influence on change due to its focus on the past rather than the future; also continuous development has never been the main objective of accreditation nor has it encouraged sharing of good practices (Bishop 2004).

In addition to the above, accreditation has been criticised in terms of accreditation process (Ewell 2007; Saunders 2007; Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder 2009; Bievre 2011); focus on learning outcomes (Wergin 2005; OECD 2009); its influence on academic quality (Yorke 1999; Leef 2003; Saunders 2007; Murray 2009; Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder 2009); accountability (Leef 2003; Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder 2009); peer-review process (Wergin 2005; Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder 2009; Garfolo and L'Huillier 2015) and standards and performance indicators (Leef 2003; Ewell 2007; Provezis 2010).

Due to recent emphasis on academic quality improvement in higher education, some alternative quality improvement methods have been adopted. Academic audit, which is much more recent compared to accreditation, has been designed to maintain or improve teaching and learning quality (Dill 1999) and focuses on processes employed by academic institutions to assure quality based on standards determined by institutions themselves (Dill and Beerkens 2010). Similarly, AQIP (Academic Quality Improvement Program) requires that quality improvement initiatives of an institution become an integral part of institutional culture and assist in educating students so that they will perform to their best potential (Spangehl 2000).

Research design and method

The main aim of this study was to determine perceptions on the influence of accreditation on academic quality. Programme accreditation in the US context was the focus of the research; therefore, perceptions of accreditation self-study coordinators and administrators with accreditation experience of programmes which were accredited by a US accrediting agency were focused on. The secondary aim of the study was to determine if the perceptions of self-study coordinators and programme administrators differed based on the country of the institution, type of the institution, the approximate age of the programme, the average number of students per class, the accreditation status of the programme, instructor's gender, instructor's nationality, whether the instructor worked as a self-study coordinator during the accreditation process, instructor's teaching duty, instructor's teaching experience, whether the instructor has an administrative duty, the instructor's administrative duty and administrative experience.

The study group was comprised of accreditation self-study process coordinators and administrators with accreditation experience. During the accreditation process, programmes assign self-study process coordinators to oversee the process and submit the report to the accrediting agency as a result of the self-study process. Both accreditation self-study process coordinators and administrators of accredited programmes are assumed to be competent in observing the outcomes of accreditation process as a result of being involved in the actual accreditation process. Thus, it is targeted to contribute to the functioning of accreditation processes to be employed in higher education institutions.

Among 96 programmes studied, 87 (90.6%) were in the USA while the remaining 9 (9.4%) were from other countries: Qatar, Peru, Kuwait, Colombia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey. 46 (47.9%) programmes were in state universities, 15 (15.6%) in private universities and the remaining 35 (36.5%) were independent programmes accredited by the same accrediting agency. At the time of the research, 48 programmes (50.0%) were in operation for 1–20 years; 29 (30.2%) for 21–40 years; 15 (15.6%) for 41–60 years and the remaining 4 (4.2%) were in operation for 61 years and more. 7 (7.3%) programmes had classrooms of 1–7 students; 66 (68.8%) 8–15 students; 19 (19.8%) 16–20 students and the remaining 4 had an average of 21 or more students in their classrooms. While 54 (56.3%) of the programmes were granted initial accreditation and 41 (42.7%) re-accreditation, one programme went through different accreditation schemes at the same time.

The details regarding the characteristics of the study group can be summarised as follow: 61 (63.5%) of the participants were female while the remaining 35 (36.5%) were male; 73 (76.0%) of the participants were American and the remaining 23 (24%) French, Tunisian, Canadian, English, Asian, Colombian, Ukrainian, Portuguese, Indian, Chinese-Filipino, Dutch, Macedonian, Egyptian, Brazilian, Caucasian, Russian and Korean. While 77 (80.2%) of participants worked as an accreditation coordinator, the remaining 19 (19.8%) did not work as a coordinator during the accreditation process. 44 (45.8%) had teaching duties as opposed to 52 (54.2%) that did not have active teaching duties at the time. 58 (60.4%) of the participants worked as directors, 7 (7.3%) as vice-directors, 6 (6.3%) as heads of departments and 22 (22.9%) worked as coordinators of different units.

In the study, 'General Scanning', which is one of the descriptive survey models, was implemented and data was collected by means of a scale developed by the researchers. To achieve this, a comprehensive literature review was conducted, a pool of items was created based on the literature review, existing questionnaires and scales developed and implemented on similar topics (Arslan 2000; Robertson 2002; Lundberg 2003; Lopez 2005; Zerihun, Beishuizen, and Van Os 2012; Heffner 2013) and already existing standards of accrediting agencies (USDE, CHEA, CEA, UCIEP).The items included in the newly formed questionnaire were revised, eliminated and categorised under themes. Revised and modified in accordance with expert advice and opinion throughout the process, the scale was comprised of 93 items under 6 categories before the pilot scheme.

Before piloting, linguistic equivalence studies were conducted as the scale would be implemented in an international setting. Fifty English language instructors from different nationalities participated

in the pilot study and the participation rate was calculated as 80%. Proposed changes were made according to the results of the pilot scheme, instructors' comments and expert opinion.

Before actual implementation, the questionnaire was sent to three American English language instructors for review and changes were made based on their recommendations. After the final changes, the questionnaire was finalised consulting expert opinion. In its final form, the questionnaire was comprised of 70 items in addition to 13 questions included in the demographic information section.

As for the actual implementation, the questionnaire was sent to 204 accreditation self-study coordinators and programme administrators by means of a web link and 96 valid questionnaires were returned. The response rate was calculated as 47.05%.

Validity and reliability studies were conducted after the data collection process was completed. So as to achieve this, firstly, factor analyses were conducted. Six factors were excluded from the scale as a result of the factor analyses. The final version of the scale was comprised of 64 items in addition to those included in the demographic information section and established a single factor structure explaining 53.025% of total variance and 3394 of Eigen value. The reliability coefficient of the scale was calculated as .986 (Cronbach's Alpha). As it can also be concluded based on the Cronbach's Alpha (.986), the internal consistency was found strongly high ($a = .99$), which indicates the reliability of the scale.

The comparative analyses of data were conducted by means of SPSS 21.0. Within the scope of the analyses, frequency and percentage calculations, Mann–Whitney U Test, Kruskal–Wallis H Test and Independent Samples t Test were implemented. In addition, the responses were analysed on the basis of particular items included in the questionnaire. The processes and practices that accreditation contributes most and contributes least to were classified based on the responses of accreditation self-study coordinators and programme administrators.

Findings

In this study, the perceptions of accreditation self-study process coordinators and programme administrators were explored by means of a scale devised by the researchers. The research revealed that perceptions of accreditation self-study process coordinators and programme administrators do not differ significantly based on the country of the institution ($z = −0.01; p > .05$), type of the institution ($x^2 = 5.33; p > .05$), the average number of students per class ($x^2 = 0.83; p > .05$), instructor's gender ($t = 0.66; p > .05$), instructor's nationality ($z = −1.37; p > .05$), whether the instructor worked as a self-study coordinator during the accreditation process ($z = −0.75; p > .05$), instructor's teaching duty ($t = 0.86; p > .05$), instructor's teaching experience ($x^2 = 1.32; p > .05$), whether the instructor has an administrative duty ($z = −0.82; p > .05$), the instructor's administrative duty ($x^2 = 6.36; p > .05$) and administrative experience ($x^2 = 0.98; p > .05$). However, the findings indicated that the perceptions of accreditation self-study process coordinators and programme administrators differ significantly based on the approximate age of the programme ($x^2 = 6.55; p > .05$) and the accreditation status of the programme ($t = 2.30; p < .05$).

In the scale, the approximate age of the programme was one of the dependent variables and it was included in the 'Demographic Information' part of the scale as an open-ended question. The responses from the participants were categorised based on the literature review and it was found that accreditation self-study coordinators and programme administrators working in programmes which have operated for 1–20 years think that accreditation contributes more to the improvement of processes and practices within the scope of academic quality in their institutions compared to the self-study coordinators and programme administrators working in programmes which have been functioning for more than 41 years.

Similarly, a statistically meaningful difference was explored in the perceptions of accreditation process self-study coordinators and programme administrators in terms of the 'accreditation status of the programme'. The results revealed that accreditation self-study coordinators and programme

Table 1. Processes and Practices that Accreditation Contributes Most to.

Items	$\bar{x}$	ss	sh
Importance attached to learning outcomes	4.65	0.65	0.07
Culture of continuous quality improvement in the institution	4.58	0.63	0.06
Alignment of learning outcomes with programme review	4.55	0.71	0.07
Quality of educational programme as a whole	4.48	0.65	0.07
Systematic documentation of institutional processes and practices	4.46	0.85	0.09

administrators working in programmes which have been granted initial accreditation think that accreditation contributes more to the improvement of academic quality in their institution compared to accreditation self-study coordinators and programme administrators working in programmes which have been re-accredited.

In addition to the comparative analyses, the responses were analysed based on particular items included in the questionnaire. The processes and practices that accreditation contributes most and contributes least to were classified according to responses of accreditation self-study coordinators and programme administrators.

As seen in Table 1, accreditation contributes most to *importance attached to learning outcomes* within an institution (4.65), which indicates that institutions start to put more emphasis on learning outcomes by means of accreditation. Then follow *culture of continuous quality improvement in the institution* (4.58); *alignment of learning outcomes with program review* (4.55); *quality of educational program as a whole* (4.48) and *systematic documentation of institutional processes and practices* (4.46).

A remarkable finding was that there were no negative responses for the items *Action plan proposed during the accreditation process is implemented* and *Previous suggestions for improvement are put into practice*. Similarly, the items *Action plan proposed during the accreditation process is implemented* (4.44); *Previous suggestions for improvement are put into practice* (4.44); *Data collected throughout the accreditation process is used for improvement* (4.43); *There is a sound follow-up process to monitor the implementation and accomplishment of the action plan proposed during the accreditation process* (4.34) and *Data collected throughout the accreditation process is shared with instructors to promote improvement* (4.32) were all under the category of 'Follow-Up Activities' of the scale during the actual implementation process and they all fell under the category of 'The Processes and Practices that accreditation Contributes Most to' according to participants' responses.

As seen in Table 2, accreditation contributes least to *the number of students who graduate from the program* (3.31), which indicates that the number of students who graduate from a programme does not increase by means of accreditation. Then follow, *instilling students with a desire to continue to develop via lifelong learning* (3.34); *assignment of regular homework to students to contribute to their learning* (3.34); *students' taking responsibility for their own learning* (3.43) and *instilling students with the will to develop regular study habits* (3.43).

A significant finding here is that some of the indicators that were stated under the category of 'Student Development' during the actual implementation process of the scale fell under the category of 'Processes and Practices that Accreditation Contributes Least to' based on participants' responses. In this context, *students' taking responsibility for their own learning* (3.43); *students' critical thinking skills* (3.60) and *students' active involvement in learning process* (3.64), when evaluated compared to other stated processes and practices, are among the ones that accreditation contributes least to.

Table 2. Processes and Practices that Accreditation Contributes Least to.

Items	$\bar{x}$	ss	sh
The number of students who graduate from the programme	3.31	1.06	0.11
Instilling students with a desire to continue to develop via lifelong learning	3.34	1.09	0.11
Assignment of regular homework to students to contribute to their learning	3.34	1.13	0.12
Students' taking responsibility for their own learning	3.43	0.98	0.1
Instilling students with the will to develop regular study habits	3.43	1.06	0.11

Conclusions and discussion

The results of the study indicate that in general accreditation influences academic quality in a positive way and it contributes to the improvement of processes and practices within the scope of academic quality in a programme or institution. In terms of its contribution to quality, this finding is in parallel with some previous research conducted by Berry (1999); Saunders (2007); Ferrara (2007) and Saurbier (2013). However, there are also studies in literature indicating the opposite (Sheahan 1997; Brua-Behrens 2003; Bishop 2004).

One of the significant findings of the research is that the programmes that have been functioning for 1–20 years benefit more from the accreditation process compared to ones that have existed for 41 years and more. In other words, accreditation leads to more improvements in the processes and practices of relatively newly established programmes. This could be because programmes that have been functioning for a relatively shorter period of time utilise accreditation as a guide to establish and improve their processes and practices and this contributes to the improvement of their programmes as a whole. According to Dew (2009), while an institution functioning for a few decades could be considered a newcomer, one that has stood the test of time for more than 100 years, this endurance could be equated with quality. Therefore, long-established universities are considered the best in terms of academic quality (Arslan 2000). Obviously, accreditation process takes too much time and energy making very little contribution in return in well-established universities where standards are clearly above the threshold level (Dill 2000).

The findings also indicate that accreditation makes a greater contribution to the improvement of processes and practices within the scope of academic quality in programmes that have been accredited for the first time compared to ones that have been re-accredited. One possible reason for this finding could be that programmes that apply for accreditation for the first time examine their existing processes and practices in detail to become a quality programme meeting standards specified by the accrediting agency, propose action plans for improvement and put these plans into practice. Any possible investigation, research, documentation and improvement activity is usually realised to meet the standards in the initial accreditation process. Maintaining the current state and possibly improving the programme may not be as hard and time-consuming as when significant changes are needed as in the initial accreditation process. In the literature, no studies were found directly investigating quality based on accreditation status of a programme. Saunders (2007) conducted research in an institution that was re-accredited and concluded that accreditation makes a significant contribution to programme quality. However, the study conducted by Bishop (2004) in an institution that was in the process of re-accreditation showed that AQIP was more influential in re-accredited universities in terms of share of good practices, institutional development and promotion of continuous improvement as a whole.

The research also revealed that accreditation contributes most to *importance attached to learning outcomes* within an institution. According to McEady (2006), quality assurance should put emphasis on learning outcomes and experiences contributing to those outcomes. A study conducted in Norwegian context demonstrated the positive attitudes of academic staff towards the introduction of learning outcomes as part of the quality assurance (Aamodt, Frølich, and Stensaker 2016). Likewise, together with increased emphasis on learning outcomes and student experiences, the focus shifted from curricular specifications to student learning outcomes and accountability and significantly higher levels of achievement of learning outcomes is reported (Volkwein et al. 2007). Dill and Beerkens (2013) emphasised that the most significant contribution of qualifications frameworks of a country is to encourage a focus on student learning outcomes rather than course content in national debates about academic standards. On the other hand, Ewell (2007), who criticised accreditation for its emphasis on learning outcomes, characterised accreditation as an ineffective process. Putting emphasis on learning outcomes is undeniably regarded as one of the most significant contributions of accreditation. The important point is the extent to which learning outcomes specified within the process and the importance attached to this process will influence student learning.

In the research, *development of culture of continuous quality improvement in the institution* was ranked the second among the processes and practices accreditation contributes most to. Accordingly, it can be concluded that accreditation process makes a significant contribution to the development of culture of continuous quality improvement. Sarrico and her colleagues (2010) indicated that the main goal of quality evaluation methods like accreditation is the promotion of higher education institutions' continuous quality improvement through operational decisions. Therefore, US accrediting agencies are placing substantial emphasis on the continuous improvement function of accreditation as it is considered accreditation's greatest strength (Cheng 2015). Accordingly, the programmes need to provide evidence of assessment and continuous improvement practices so as to comply with accreditation standards (Volkwein et al. 2007). There are also some studies indicating the opposite regarding continuous improvement. A study conducted by Bishop (2004) revealed that continuous improvement has never been the main goal of traditional accreditation. Criticising institutions for considering accreditation as an activity that will take place for once only, Oz (2005) emphasised that most institutions see accreditation as a once-in-a-life-time effort and they are not aware that what is necessary in accreditation is a continuous process which will last lifelong as continuous improvement and monitoring of the system. Similarly, Brua-Behrens (2003) indicated that once a programme or institution is accredited, the self-study report is not used for improvement and as accreditation takes place in ten-year cycles, it does not make sufficient contribution to improvement of culture of continuous quality improvement.

According to the findings of the research, the action plans proposed during the accreditation process are implemented and there is a sound follow-up procedure to monitor the implementation and accomplishment of action plans proposed by programmes or institutions during the accreditation process. A research conducted by Berry (1999) revealed that action plans gave a clear sense of what is to be done and who is going to do it, revealed goals and priorities for the future, used student learning data to identify key learning areas and set up priority areas for instructional plans and implementation strategies.

Apart from the implementation of action plan and the sound follow-up procedure to monitor the implementation and accomplishment of the action plan, institutions attach importance to *putting into practice the previous suggestions for improvement*, *using data collected throughout the accreditation process for improvement* and *sharing the collected data with instructors to promote improvement*, which are mainly the follow-up activities after certification. This can be considered as an indicator that institutions put emphasis on realising the activities set forth by accrediting agencies even after being granted accreditation certificates to maintain their accreditation status.

Concerning activities accreditation least contributes to, the research revealed that accreditation contributes least to *the number of students who graduate from a program*. According to Dill (2005), although graduation rates are outcomes valued by universities, those rates can be increased by more effective teaching and student learning as well as lowering academic standards. It is a fact that high-academic standards cannot be achieved solely by high-quality teaching (Sharp 2017). While one important objective of quality assurance is to produce quality graduates (Garfolo and L'Huillier 2015; Sharp 2017), graduation rates are not quality indicators and within the scope of accountability; institutions may have very high graduation rates but the state may be educating very few people to sustain a healthy civic and economic life (Shulock 2004). Likewise, when graduation rates are triggers for a system of reward and punishment, there is a possibility that higher education institutions may become institutions graduating sufficient number of students but not caring about what those graduates know and can do as a result of their education (Lovett and Mundhenk 2004).

Another significant finding of the research is that items *students' taking responsibility of their own learning*, *improvement of students' critical thinking skills* and *students' active involvement in the learning process* are among the processes and practices accreditation contributes least to. In the related literature, those items were found to be associated with student learning. *Students' taking responsibility of their own learning* (Harvey and Green 1993; Robertson 2002); *improvement of students' critical thinking*

skills (Harvey and Green 1993) and *students' active involvement in the learning process* (Troutt 1978; Kuh 2001; Pascarella 2001; Volkwein et al. 2007; Zerihun, Beishuizen, and Van Os 2012) can be considered as indicators of whether the students have achieved the final targeted outcome, which is learning or how successful they are in the process. It can be concluded based on this finding that accreditation contributes less to student learning related activities compared to such other processes and practices as *analysis of data collected about student needs* (Massy 2003; Murmura, Casolani, and Bravi 2016); *the institutions' commitment to educational quality* (Adams 1993) and *monitoring delivery and assessment of learning closely* (Adams 1993; Dill and Beerkens 2013).[1]

Note

1. Data in this study was based on Ulker's (2015) PhD dissertation titled 'An International Research on the Influence of Accreditation of Foreign Language Preparatory Programs on Academic Quality' under the supervision of Aysen Bakioglu at Institute of Educational Sciences, Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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