The Quality and Accreditation of Online Public Administration Programs

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 accelerated the development of online learning around the world. As a result, many universities transitioned to fully online or hybrid learning in which face-to-face and online teaching are combined. Many universities indicated that they will continue with online or hybrid learning in a post-pandemic world indicating that online programs will remain a constant feature of the education landscape. This is also applicable to public administration programs at present, a total of 216 Master of Public Administration (MPA) degrees are available for online study at the StudyPortal (2022), offered by a variety of different universities. However, with the exception of the USA, national and international accreditation bodies often only assess the quality of traditional face-to-face programmes and neglect the accreditation of hybrid and online programs. This also applies to public administration programmes resulting in a large number of online programs not being assessed in terms of quality and standard. Accreditation plays an important role in ensuring quality and standards are adhered to. In terms of public administration programmes accreditation ensures that graduates have the knowledge and skills to contribute to a public service that is responsive, effective and efficient. This article argues that in a post-pandemic work it is important to assess the quality and standard of online educational programs in all disciplines but specifically in

public administration to ensure the provision of quality public services. This article recommends that specific criteria be added to the existing accreditation standards already being used for public administration programmes to assess not only face-to-face programmes but also online offerings.

INTRODUCTION

The development and implementation of quality public services require senior public servants to be well-educated and trained. Consequently, the need for quality public administration programmes of a high standard. However, this raises the question of who and what determines the quality and standards of such programmes. Peer assessments, national and international accreditation are seen as powerful instruments to determine the quality of higher education programmes (*cf.* Harvey 2004). As stated by the New England Commission of Higher Education (2018), becoming accredited is a status granted to an educational institution or a programme, indicating that quality standards have been met or exceeded. The origin of accreditation dates back to the late 1800s, while the first professional accreditation bodies were created in 1905 (Matthews 2018:33). These professional accreditation groups were formed to prevent the uneven delivery of professional education programmes (Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications 1995). Such accreditation concentrated on classic academic programmes; for example, medicine; with other disciplines, for instance, public administration that received its first accreditation from NASPAA (the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration) only in 1980 (NASPAA 2023).

However, since accreditation started it has predominantly been face-to-face programmes that formed the focus of assessment, excluding hybrid and online programs. It was only in 1996 that the first online accredited and fully web-based university was developed (Online Schools 2022). Since then, many models, standards, and requirements were developed for the accreditation of online education programs. The exponential growth of online education during the Covid-19 pandemic amplified the need for accreditation to determine the quality and standard of these offerings. This drastic increase in online programs is supported by Rungta (2022), who states that in 2017, the BlackBoard platform was used by 30% of all higher education institutions for online education. By 2020, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, in approximately 90% of all countries, a digital online learning process was adopted, with many higher education institutions indicating they would stay (at least partly) online after the pandemic. This view is also supported by Toquero (2020), who mentions that universities around the world that closed

due to the pandemic recognised the benefits of moving classes online and intend to keep an online presence. Garcia, Perez and Hayashi (2021) call this 'the new normal in learning and education'.

Without a doubt Covid-19 presented an opportunity for many universities to review their higher education programmes and to become more innovative (Rapanta, Butturi, Goodyear, Guardia, and Koole 2021). In addition, in some instances, students performed better in online education than in traditional face-to-face environments (Rapanta *et al.* 2021). The pandemic was the driver accelerating the uptake of hybrid forms of and full online education, resulting in the question of whether the design and delivery of these programs represents quality. At present, 216 MPA degrees are available for online study at the StudyPortal (2022) from a variety of universities. These include the University of Birmingham, the University of Illinois, the University of Virginia, the University of Sydney, the University of Malawi, and the University of South Africa. In addition, Keystone (2022) has 47 fully online MPA degrees offered by a variety of universities, including the University of Delaware, Hawaii Pacific University, and The University of North Carolina. The prestigious Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University also offers a fully online MPA for students (Syracuse University 2022). This indicates that many universities have seen the benefit of online programs in public administration and students are benefiting from enrolling for these offerings available seven days a week regardless of distance from the university.

Notwithstanding popularity many public administration programmes with online delivery are not being accredited. Accreditation of public administration programmes offered by professional public administration organisations such as the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration (IASIA), the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) or the European Group for Public Administration (EGPA), is done mainly on traditional, face-to-face programmes (Raffel, Maser and Calarusse 2011) while online programs are being neglected.

Quality-assessment and accreditation are not only important for public administration programmes and academic departments but also for students. Students will be assured of quality when enrolling for an online program knowing that such programs provide the knowledge and skills required for effective and efficient governance and service delivery. As Garcia *et al.* (2021) state, "accreditation is a process of quality control and can differ by context and mode of learning, thereby requiring some standardisation. This includes concerns related to the quality of online learning, which varies significantly from one provider to another". Such accreditation concerns the mission of the program, the fit thereof with the contents, pedagogical concerns, the organisation and staff, the formative and summative assessment of students, and the evaluation of the program by the students (*cf.* Van Jaarsveldt *et al.* 2019). Standards are set to ensure conformity and criteria that

need to be exceeded in order to get accredited. Accreditation is an assurance of the quality of programs. If a program is not accredited, students are unsure about its quality, subsequently the absence of accreditation of public administration programs delivered through online technologies results in questions being asked about their quality by students and employers (*cf.* Gaston 2013).

This article argues that in times of crisis, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic, online or hybrid public administration programmes have become more widely adopted. This implies that it is becoming increasingly important that online public administration programs should be assessed in terms of quality and standard. Such assessment should be facilitated by public administration organisations that conduct accreditation. This could promote excellence and best practices in online public administration education. To support this argument, we first examine the differences between traditional programmes and online programs. We then focus on the importance of accrediting online public administration programs and determine the additional criteria required to conduct an online accreditation. The main research question addressed below concerns the importance of accrediting online public administration programs and asks what aspects should be considered when accrediting an online public administration program? Before, however, examining these aspects, it is necessary to describe the methodology used in this article.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative methodology to explore the concept of accreditation in higher education and the requirements for the accreditation of online programs in public administration. The article starts with a literature review. According to Gasa, Mafora and Maphalala (2020:133), this involves examining existing knowledge on, for example, theories, critiques, research findings, assessments and the evaluation of a specific topic – in this instance, accreditation in higher education.

Second, the article uses componential analysis to determine the attributes of the main terms relevant to the research. According to Feza (2020:467) componential analysis determines characteristics and qualities by clarifying the meaning of concepts. The concepts used include accreditation, accreditation in higher education, online accreditation of educational programmes, and requirements for the accreditation of online public administration programs.

Third, this article investigates the current role and functions of public administration organisations in terms of their role and responsibility for the accreditation of online academic programs in public administration. This was done by analysing current public administration accreditation processes to determine how these differ from the standards required for the accreditation of an online education program. Thus, a comparative study was conducted between the different

accreditation standards to determine what aspects should be considered when accrediting an online public administration program.

THE QUALITY OF TRADITIONAL AND ONLINE PROGRAMMES

The main difference between traditional programmes and online programs (i.e. distance learning) is, of course, the way interaction occurs between lecturers and students and between students themselves. There are also differences in the way students need to incorporate the contents of the study material (Moore 1989). This implies that the quality of interaction is the main issue at stake (DeLacey and Leonard 2002). Ping (2011) concludes that "the quality of interaction between learner and online content, as well as learner-teacher-peers, has to be ensured in achieving efficacy of web-based teaching and learning towards the creation and maintenance of sustainable learning communities" (2011:70). To quote Harasim (1989:55), "knowledge building occurs as students explore issues, examine one another's arguments, agree, disagree, and question positions. Collaboration contributes to higher order learning through cognitive restructuring or conflict resolution". High-quality interactions between students are thus essential to positive learning outcomes (Keefe 2003). Whether online programs are superior to traditional programmes in establishing such high-quality interaction, is still a matter of debate; unfortunately lacking much empirical evidence.

Wang *et al.* (2019) mention that not being present in the same location at the same time during online teaching could create feelings of isolation, frustration, anxiety and confusion as well as disengagement and higher withdrawals due to a lack of social interaction and instructor presence (Capra 2011; Rovai and Wighting 2005; Trello 2007; Wang *et al.* 2019). Others point to the challenges of online programs in terms of community-building, providing skills to integrate verbal and non-verbal communication, and the socialisation of students in an academic environment (Rovai and Jordan 2004). Still others point out that traditional programmes would be superior in imparting analytical and synthesis skills, whereas online programs would be superior in imparting comprehension and reproducing knowledge (Wang *et al.* 2019).

Research has established that traditional programmes and online programs differ in the students' perception of the clarity of instruction (Chen and Jones 2007), their perception of the dullness of the teaching, its efficiency and appeal (Vamosi, Pierce and Slotkin 2004), but not in the effectiveness of programmes in providing knowledge.

Important for our argument is that in academia, one has to distinguish between students acquiring knowledge, becoming skilled**,** and developing an academic

attitude. Empirical research is positive about online programs creating knowledge, that is, the transformation of facts and information into knowledge (Zull 2002). However, opinions are more varied when it comes to becoming skilled and developing an academic attitude. These considerations result in additional criteria for the assessment of the quality of online programs (*cf.* Zull, 2002; Vamosi, Pierce and Slotkin 2004).

According to the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE 2015:10), the specific criteria to be included in assessing the quality of online programs need to determine whether such programs are:

- multifaceted, including the strategy, policy, online infrastructure and processes to be used;
- dynamic, including flexibility to accommodate rapid changes in technology;
- mainstreamed and used as a tool for reflective practice by members of staff in their daily work;
- representative of stakeholders' views, including students, staff, government, and broader society;
- multifunctional and provide a roadmap for future improvement;
- supporting professional development, in particular through best practice and the exchange of information;
- supporting communication and knowledge transfer; and
- supporting research and scholarship.

A 2017 discussion paper published by the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum examines quality assurance in online learning and proposes standards to ensure quality in such programs. These standards include leadership and management developing strategic plans, creating performance indicators, and providing professional development for staff to ensure effective student learning. The standards also highlight the need for reviews and constant improvement to ensure program quality. Resources and information should be regularly updated for students. Structures should be put in place to ensure quality educational and personal support for students. Furthermore, the standards emphasise student experiences that should allow students to interact with each other and to interact socially. Curriculum design should include sound educational principles to support learning, while assessments should provide students the opportunity to show the knowledge they have gained. Lastly, learning outcomes should ensure that the qualification level is in place (APEC 2017:30).

The National Council for Private School Accreditation (NCPSA:2022) states that to ensure quality in distance online education, specific criteria need to be met in terms of standards. These standards include the vision, purpose, and mission of the institution, the governance of the institution, as well as its structure to support the needs of students. Furthermore, a quality-designed curriculum and qualified

staff is needed, as well as a comprehensive online delivery system. Administrative and technical support to ensure the readiness of academic staff to teach online is critical, student services should be available online to support the needs and progress of students, and evaluation and assessment of student success and learning, are required. The proposed criteria for the accreditation of online programs are included in Table 1.

Table 1: Common quality and accreditation criteria for online educational programs

Theme	Indicator
Governance	Clear vision, purpose, goal, strategic plans, budgeting, time and quality leadership with an institutional readiness and policy
Teaching and Learning Effectiveness	Quality student-lecturer interaction, knowledge transfer, prompt feedback, support for critical thinking and student retention
Student Support and student satisfaction	Responsiveness to student needs and support services to assist with student needs and resources, promote social interaction between students
Technology	Online delivery readiness, technology infrastructure, ability to be flexible and adapt to new technology
Curriculum Design	Quality designed curriculum, pedagogy, learning outcomes, purpose and assessment, level of delivery, quality standards, knowledge and skills required
Staff and professional development	Staff must be trained, skilled and ready to teach online and facilitate online learning
Evaluation and Assessment	Program evaluation and assessment (formative and summative) for student learning, reflection to ensure online quality was achieved or could be improved
Organisational/ Institutional-Impact	Institutional support (both technical and administrative) and institutional resources (budget, human resources, time, internet connections and computers/laptops) strong rationale for distance education and planning for the future

Source: (Adapted from Shelton 2011; the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) 1995; Institute for Higher Education Policy 2000; Lee and Dziuban 2002; Lockhart and Lacy 2002; Osika 2004; Moore and Kearsley 2005; International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) 2015 and Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) 2017).

Table 1 indicates that the criteria for the accreditation of online educational programs include a variety of aspects. Although adequate technology is a key requirement for online educational programs, it is also important to ensure that the governance and planning of online educational programs meet the criteria as outlined in Table 1. Students should be supported in an online environment and staff should be trained with the skills required to support student success.

This section addressed the question of which criteria could be included in an accreditation of online programs. The next section will address the implications thereof for the possible accreditation of such programs.

THE ACCREDITATION OF ONLINE PROGRAMS

The accreditation of higher education programmes dates back to the late 1800s in the United States (US). It was a way for colleges and universities with high academic standards to distinguish themselves from institutions that claimed to be colleges but had curricula similar to high schools (Harcleroad 1980). Accreditation standards and procedures continued to develop as accreditation bodies in many academic disciplines were created around the world (Matthews 2018:32).

It is widely accepted that the accreditation of higher education qualifications helps to ensure quality (Alstete 2007; Blauch 1959; Charmonman and Chorpothong 2004; Philips and Kinser 2018; Pollard 2017; Schritter 2022). However, it is impossible to conceptualise the term 'accreditation' without first examining the concept of quality. According to Mukhopadhyay (2016:9), quality is a metaphysical concept comprising of specific attributes. In terms of quality in education, Mukhopadhyay (2016:9, 22–23) lists the following attributes of quality: excellence in education, value added to education, achieving outcomes and experiences, conformity with outputs as well as meeting and exceeding expectations. Quality is a holistic process that should pervade all stages of education, from planning an educational programme to the delivery of the programme, communication, addressing student concerns, assessment as well as staff responsible for the delivery of the programme. Quality-assessment requires all the aspects mentioned by Mukhopadhyay to be present in an educational programme being accredited.

Alstete (2007) explains that the word 'accreditation' is derived from the Latin word 'credito', which means trust. One needs to trust the quality of the education being provided, trust the quality of the institution providing the education, and trust the quality of the staff providing the programme. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2020:10) and Katsamunska and Rosenbaum (2019:30), accreditation refers to the official approval provided by an organisation that specific standards have been met. In his book entitled Accreditation in Higher Education, Blauch (1959) writes that accreditation indicates the assurance of a minimum level of education quality. He continues by stating that accreditation in education refers to the recognition that an institution receives for achieving a standard or meeting criteria, as confirmed by a competent agency or association. Accreditation refers to a set of quality standards for all educational institutions or degree programmes to achieve and ensures accountability within universities and degree programmes.

In many instances, accreditation is a voluntary process of self-regulation and peer review (Philips and Kinser 2018:3). In South Africa, the Council on Higher Education (CHE 2022) states that accreditation takes place when specific accreditation criteria are met by an academic programme. Accreditation involves both self-evaluation and external evaluation. Eaton (2010) states that accreditation includes the establishment of standards, institutional self-review and peer-review, confirmation that accreditation has been achieved and the awarding of the accredited status. In terms of self-evaluation, an institution may reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of educational programmes and accordingly judge their quality. According to the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE 2019), self-evaluation allows institutions to determine their weaknesses and address these before an external evaluation takes place.

External evaluation during the accreditation process takes place when an educational programme is evaluated by an external body or organisation. During the external evaluation process data is collected, interviews are conducted, and evidence is gathered (ASHE 2019). This type of evaluation is carried out by a team of external experts or peers. At the end of the external evaluation, a report is compiled highlighting aspects that need improvement. Once an educational programme is accredited, it receives academic recognition. With successful accreditation, a student has the assurance of receiving a quality education, while prospective employers can be assured of the quality of the course or degree completed by the prospective employee.

According to the Maryland Higher Education Commission (2022), accreditation is especially important when considering non-traditional forms of instruction such as distance or online learning. According to Shelton (2011), online education has been criticised as being of poor quality and inferior to traditional education. Thus, as the number of online educational programs has increased, the need to ensure quality has become more important. The first attempts to assess quality in the accreditation of online education were developed in 1995 by WCET, which issued the Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programmes. These principles focused on three categories for quality evaluation, namely, (i) curriculum and instruction, (ii) institutional context and commitment, and (iii) evaluation and assessment. Under the second principle, 'commitment' was further divided into five areas: (i) role and mission, (ii) faculty support, (iii) resources for learning, (iv) students and student services, and (v) commitment to supporting them (WCET 1997).

Several procedures have been developed for the evaluation and quality assurance of online educational programs. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP 2000: vii) states that "distance learning can be quality learning". IHEP identifies 24 criteria, which are divided into seven themes to determine the quality of online programs: (i) institutional support that includes the reliability of

the technology infrastructure, (ii) course development, creating online course materials that engage the learner, encourage critical thinking and support revision, (iii) teaching and learning systems that allow interaction between the student and the lecturer as well as constructive feedback, (iv) course structure, which should include the objectives and outcomes of the course, (v) student support, for example, information provided to students about course enrolment, online services and where to find resources and assistance, (vi) faculty support to ensure that staff are trained and ready to teach online, and (vii) evaluation and assessment.

Further contributions to the accreditation and quality assurance of online educational programs have been made by researchers such as Lee and Dziuban (2002) and their Quality Assurance Strategy. This strategy supports thorough planning of online programs through discussion, evaluation and analysis. The Assessment Model by Lockhart and Lacy (2002) determines seven components to assess online education, namely, (i) institutional readiness/administration (budgets, priority and management), (ii) faculty services (support, outcome measurement and training effectiveness), (iii) instructional design/course usability (technology must be user-friendly and accessible), (iv) student readiness (assessment for student readiness and preparation), (v) student services (effectiveness of provided services), (vi) learning outcomes (measurement of learning outcomes), and (vii) retention (comparing rates with face-to-face delivery and enrolment monitoring). In addition, Osika (2004) developed the Concentric Model, while Moore and Kearsley (2005) put forward recommendations for online program accreditation stressing student achievement, student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction, program or institutional reputation, and the quality of course materials.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACCREDITING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PROGRAMMES

In light of the above discussion, it is necessary to consider the implications for online programs and the assessment of their quality through accreditation. Two possible trajectories are proposed. The first possibility is to maintain the current status quo, that is, ignoring the assessment of the quality of online programs. Although some arguments support this option, there are many counterarguments provided by accreditation agencies.

The first counterargument is that the criteria in use by existing accreditation agencies such as the International Commission on the Accreditation of Public Administration and training programmes (ICAPA), the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA) can also be easily applied to

online programs. As stated by Katsamunska and Rosenbaum (2019:25), whatever the programme in public administration, it requires:

- a clear commitment to the public service
- advocacy and support of public interest values
- combining scholarship, practice and community service
- commitment by the academic department and quality academic staff
- inclusiveness of all stakeholders
- a responsive and relevant curriculum
- adequate resources
- balancing collaboration and competition.

These elements drive public administration programmes to excel and create a desire to meet, even exceed world-class standards of excellence. These elements remain important for public administration programmes regardless of mode of offering.
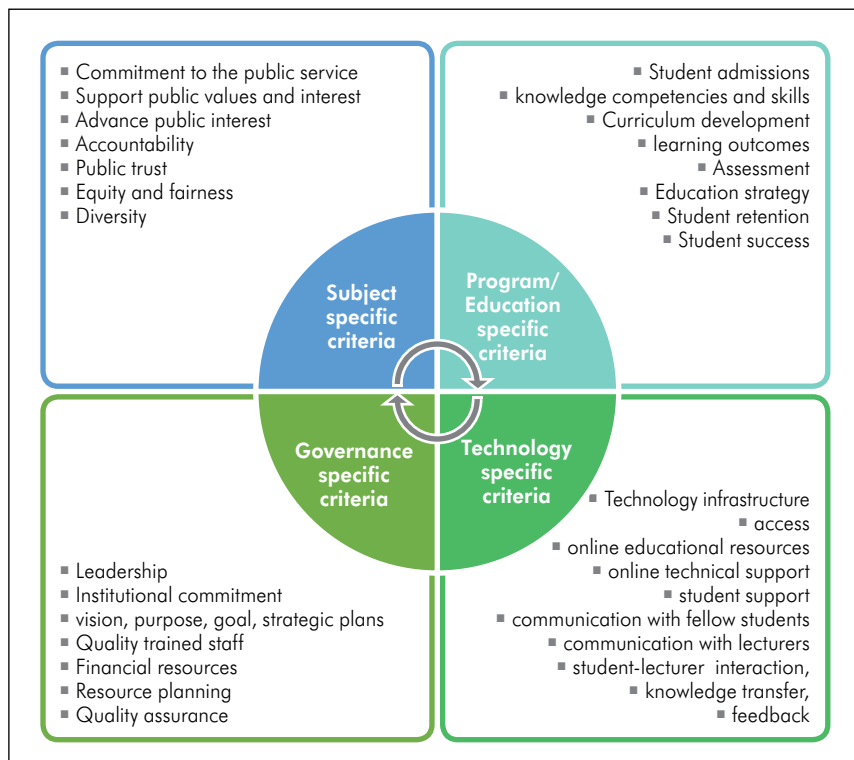
The second counterargument is that students studying an online program receive the same title (bachelor, master) as students in traditional programmes. This implies that the online program offers similar content and is of comparable quality to traditional programmes. This refers to, among others, the nature of the course offered and the study load. Empirical studies have found only small differences in learning outcomes between traditional courses and distance courses (Alsaaty, Carter, Abrahams and Alshameri 2016). Scholars have argued that the mode of instruction is the least important predictor of students' performance (DeLacey and Leonard 2002; Hatcher, Henson and LaRosa 2013). Many moderating factors influence the relative effectiveness of traditional and online programmes. Research points to the importance of students' knowledge base and technical capabilities; characteristics of the programmes (i.e. how they are designed, and the assignments involved); communication between the lecturer and students and students among one another; and the technological infrastructure required (*cf.* Alsaaty *et al.* 2016:34).

The third counterargument is that already before the Covid-19 pandemic, many traditional universities started offering online courses, recognising the merits of this mode of teaching. Consequently, many programmes are now being offered as a hybrid form of education, blending online elements with face-to-face lectures (Alsaaty *et al.* 2016). This implies that the strict division between traditional learning and online learning is fading and that it would make sense to assess the quality of such hybrid programmes and pure online programs compared with traditional programmes. Thus, assessors could determine whether suitable conditions are in place for online learning and whether their quality meets the stated standards. The last counterargument has to do with debunking myths, prejudice, and the reputation of online programs compared

with traditional programmes. As Alsaaty *et al.* (2016:31) state: "For decades, scholars have debated which mode of education is superior. Some argue that online is superior and others argue that online is less effective than traditional face-to-face courses. Still others suggest that the hybrid mode (*e.g.*, online blended with face-to-face lectures) is the most desired and productive content delivery method for students".

This question about the quality of online programs can only be settled if the quality of online programs is as systematically assessed as the quality of traditional face-to-face programmes. To do so, the current quality assessment criteria need to be modified. In public administration, quality assessment needs to examine more than just subject content and the governance of the programme; education-specific and technology-specific criteria also need to be added. Given the specifics of online programs as discussed above, the proposed criteria for the accreditation of online public administration programs are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Criteria for the accreditation of online programs

- Commitment to the public service
- Support public values and interest
- Advance public interest
- Accountability
- Public trust
- Equity and fairness
- Diversity

- Student admissions
- knowledge competencies and skills
- Curriculum development
- learning outcomes
- Assessment
- Education strategy
- Student retention
- Student success

Subject specific criteria

Program/ Education specific criteria

Governance specific criteria

Technology specific criteria

- Leadership
- Institutional commitment
- vision, purpose, goal, strategic plans
- Quality trained staff
- Financial resources
- Resource planning
- Quality assurance

- Technology infrastructure
- access
- online educational resources
- online technical support
- student support
- communication with fellow students
- communication with lecturers
- student-lecturer interaction,
- knowledge transfer,
- feedback

Source: (Authors' own construction)

As shown in Figure 1, the accreditation of online public administration programs can be divided into four equally important criteria. Subject-specific criteria focus on the values in public administration that students need to acquire, while programme- or education-specific criteria focus on the development of the curriculum and education strategy to ensure student success. Technology-specific criteria focus on the online facilitation of learning and student support. These criteria represent the only difference between traditional programmes and online programs that need to be adjusted during the accreditation process. Governance-specific criteria conform to the 2021 UNESCO recommendations on the application of quality standards for blended and distance learning programmes.

These criteria address the main prerequisites to assess the effectiveness of such programmes. They distinguish between technological, financial, pedagogical, quality assurance, examination, and evaluative aspects of online programs. Questions asked are, for instance, "What are the main challenges in terms of access, quality and equity?", "What guidelines or requirements are developed by the universities to ensure pedagogical quality?", "Do we have the financial resources required for the development of online programs?", "How are the skills and knowledge of academic staff enhanced to ensure the quality of online teaching?", "How is online quality monitored" and "How are evaluation and examination issues addressed?"

Figure 1 also raises questions on the quality of technology infrastructure, access, student-student and student-lecturer communication, knowledge transfer in the way students absorb content, and feedback provided. The main differences between traditional programmes and online programs are the mode of knowledge transfer, the possibilities to acquire the skills needed and the development of an academic attitude. The way programmes deal with such issues should have a prominent place in the quality assessment of any online public administration program.

CONCLUSIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic has transformed many traditional programmes in public administration into online programs. It is likely that in the post-pandemic era, many online programs will remain, as universities have recognised the merits of this learning mode, although discussions about the merits also continue. The quality of those newly developed online courses needs to meet accreditation standards that still have to be developed. Much has yet to be organised, technological facilities are not always sufficient, and the interaction between lecturers and students and between students themselves has to be ensured.

The main research question of this article examined the attributes of online teaching, the additional issues at stake compared with traditional face-to-face teaching, and the criteria that could be used to evaluate the quality of such programmes.

It was argued that the three main differences between traditional programmes and online programs were the mode of knowledge transfer, the possibility to acquire skills, and the development of an academic attitude. At present it is not known whether different modes of knowledge transfer have implications for the absorption of information, or the knowledge, skills, and academic attitude acquired.

This results in prejudice about the quality of online, hybrid, and traditional programmes. Programme accreditation based on international standards could confirm whether these prejudices are informed judgements or baseless claims. However, in public administration, the leading accreditation agencies such as NASPAA, ICAPA and EAPAA conduct virtually no assessments of online programs. In this article, we argued that this policy should be changed and that this could be achieved by adding additional criteria to existing accreditation standards to effectively assess all three types of programmes.

International accreditation could provide answers to the questions on the quality of online programs, students' experiences, technology required, support needed and the readiness of teaching staff. Research on these issues as published in journals mostly focuses on student satisfaction, whereas much more is at stake, for example, the isolation of students, frustration, self-discipline, and community-building. All these factors are of the utmost importance for performance. Not all universities that transitioned to online teaching due to the pandemic considered these aspects as well as the readiness of academic staff to teach online. Yet, many universities continue with online teaching in a post-pandemic world, sometimes in a hybrid way, blending traditional modes of teaching with online teaching. This in turn results in questions about the quality of these online programs. It is important to remember that quality assessments failing to account for the mode of delivery when teaching could result in the non-detection of deficiencies in programmes, which in all other respects, are perhaps excellent.

NOTE

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