

## **„How about accrediting your e-learning courses?“**

**SIG DLAE Survey – Summer 2004**

Analysis and Comments

November 2004

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# 1. Introduction

## The SIG DLAE Project

The great challenge of e-learning is still persisting and more and more actors are entering this world, extending both the business and the experimentation. Different surveys indicate that some applications are becoming consolidated and frequently used by large companies and more and more individual learners.

How does e-learning influence the academic world? Have successful models for computer-based learning and teaching been implemented so far? In the United States, it is esteemed<sup>1</sup> that nearly 50% of the universities will turn their residential courses into e-learning or blended activities within the next few years. A current survey among European universities also indicates a large increase in the number of e-learning-courses, since 65% of the universities give top priority to this subject for the next two years.<sup>2</sup>

Within the past fifty years, several institutions established associations in order to foster and preserve high quality in distance education. To achieve these aims, they use a wide range of means, e.g. promoting, standard-setting, evaluation and consultation processes, development and maintenance of high educational, ethical and business standards in education and training programs delivered through distance learning.

At present, the European universities are adapting to the Bachelor-Master-PhD system (Bologne process). In this connection, one big challenge for the educational system consists in the development of an adequate approach to assure the quality of learning and degrees. Even though some European initiatives like AMBA, ECA or EUR-ACE get involved with a European system for accreditation in higher education, an appropriate model for distance and e-learning is still missing.

The aim of the DLAE project, financed by the European Union, is to bridge this gap by developing a European accreditation system which focuses in a first attempt on courses of the master of science and engineering. In order to gain an overview of the accreditation activities and requirements of public and private e-learning-providers in Europe, the DLAE partners carried out a survey which wants to give answers to crucial questions, e.g.: How sensitive are education experts in Europe about the need of an international accreditation in e-learning? How do different actors of the business feel about this question? And which assistance can be provided by the DLAE project in this context?

## The survey

The results described below are based on 31 qualitative telephone interviews with representatives of universities (21 participants) and vocational training institutes (10 par-

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<sup>1</sup> DETC (2004): Annual Conference Report. Washington.

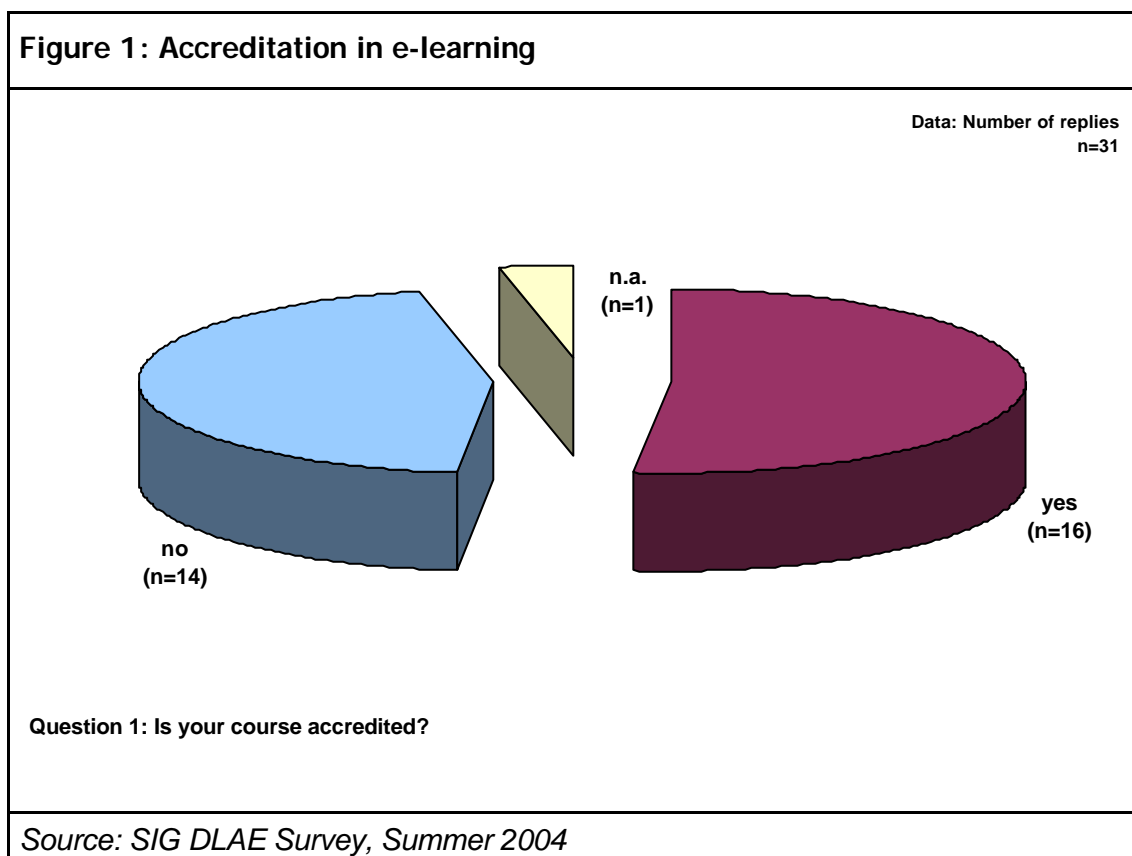
<sup>2</sup> PLS Ramboll Management (2004): Virtual Models of European Universities. Draft Final Report to the EU Commission.

ticipants) from different countries (France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Spain, Sweden, UK), carried out in summer 2004.

For this survey, only senior executives were interviewed. Interviewees are in most cases either head of administration (e.g. managing director) or pedagogical executives (e.g. professor, director of studies). They all fill responsible positions in organisations that provide distance learning courses in Europe. Although this survey is exploratory and does not claim to give representative results, it indicates some current trends in accreditation of distance learning in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Accreditation in e-learning

The first question that was put to the interviewees was whether the e-learning-courses offered by their institution were accredited or not. The results show, that accreditation is not taken for granted in European distance learning yet: About half of the courses have been accredited so far (16 out of 31), therefrom 11 courses offered by universities and five offered by private providers of vocational training.



The other half of the universities (10 out of 21) did not yet apply for any kind of accreditation. Five of those universities claim to have plans to have their courses accredited in the future, the rest of them wants to do without accreditation or hasn't

<sup>3</sup> Special thanks go to Anja Johanning and Elke Morun (both MMB Institute for Media- and Competence Research) for interviewing and helping to create this report. Also many thanks to all SIG DLAE partners for contributing interviews with experts in different European countries.

made any decision about this point yet. Five out of nine private providers of vocational training have already accredited their courses, three of them intend to do this within the next years and two are still doubtful about that subject and the related benefits.

As main reasons for their reluctance, the 14 interviewees whose courses are not yet accredited name the following:

*a) Universities*

- no obligation up to now (freedom of research and education guaranteed)
- not necessary up to now
- not necessary for the time being; but the Bologna process will create the need for such accreditation in the near future
- not necessary as in Sweden the right to hold exams is granted by the National Council for Higher Education
- no such tradition
- no existing accreditation agency for distance learning in our country
- there is no real E-Learning course yet in our university
- quality is implicit in our courses and a very important command

*b) Private providers of vocational training*

- the most important criteria for the quality of the courses are the clients
- a standardised accreditation process does not consider the market's / customer's requirements
- accreditation does not effect advantages on the market
- no national standard up to now.

While the universities refer to the lacking obligation or necessity to accredit their distance-learning-courses, the private providers point out that the accreditation of their courses is not relevant for the success of their product in the market. In their opinion, the acceptance of the course by the customer can not be ensured or predicted by a standardised accreditation process.

### **3. Well-known accreditation bodies**

Most of the interviewees know at least one accreditation body. These are mostly national accreditation agencies for Bachelor and/or Master courses (e.g. AQUAS in Germany) or general higher education (e.g. ASFOR in Italy). Some experts name state agencies, which are responsible for general admission of university courses, like the National Council for Higher Education in Sweden or the Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur (France). Besides, there are some regional approaches, e.g. in Tuscany or Emilia Romagna.

The following accreditation bodies were mentioned in detail:

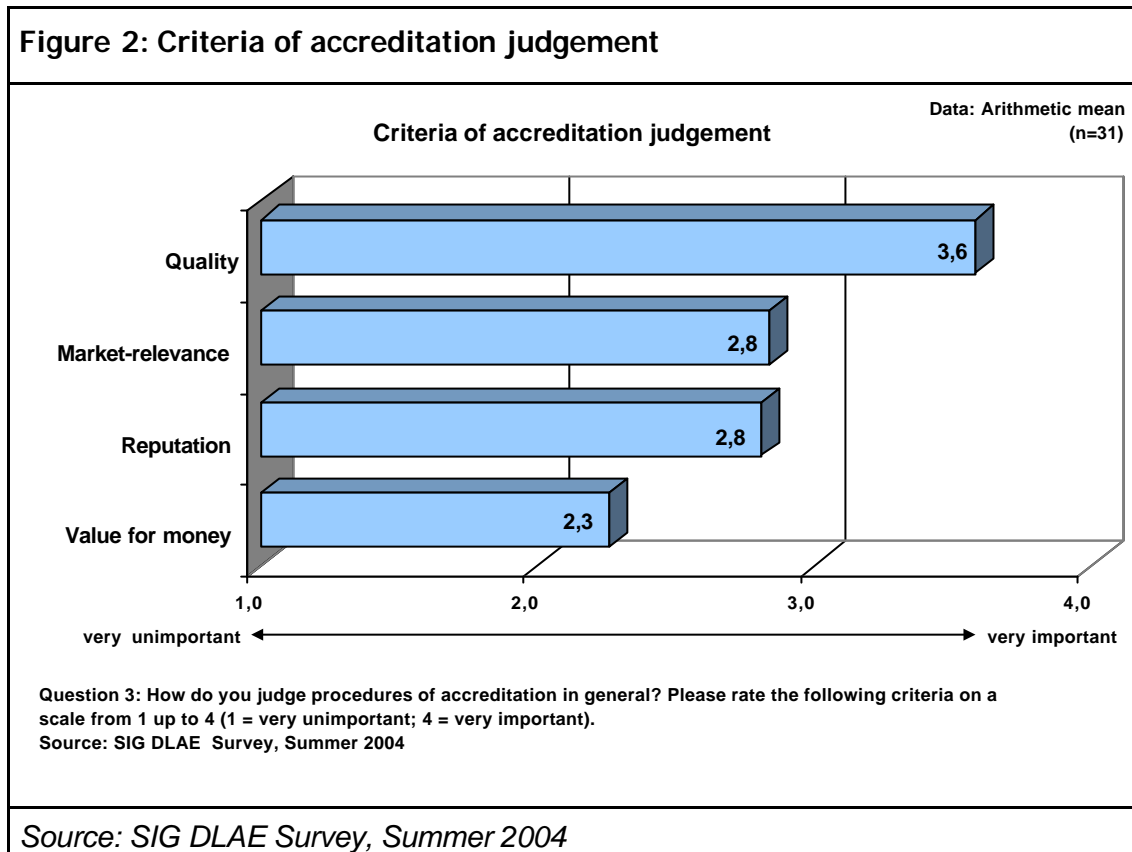
| Country        | Accreditation Body  | Comment                                   |
|----------------|---|---|
| International  | <b>ISO 9000</b> (International Organisation for Standardisation, Quality Management Systems)                                  | International quality management standard |
| Europe         | <b>ENTA</b> (European Net Trainer Association)  |   |
| Europe         | <b>EFMD</b> (European International Accreditation Institute for MBA Programmes)   |   |
| Europe         | <b>EQUIS</b> (European Quality Improvement System)  | Accredits institutions                    |
| Europe         | <b>AMBA</b> (Association of MBAs)   | Accredits programmes                      |
| Europe         | <b>EQFM</b> (European Foundation for Quality Management)  | European quality management standard      |
| Italy          | <b>ASFOR</b> (Association for Business Management Training)   |   |
| Italy          | <b>CERFAD</b> (Regional Commission for the Certification of Open and Distance Learning Materials)                             |   |
| Germany        | <b>AQAS</b> (Agency for Quality Assurance by Accreditation of Study Programmes)   |   |
| Germany        | <b>ASIIN</b> (Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Engineering Science, Informatics, Natural Science and Mathematics) |   |
| Germany        | <b>LQW2</b> (Learner oriented Quality Checks in Vocational Training)  | German quality management standard        |
| Germany        | <b>CHE</b> (Centre for University Development)  |   |
| Germany        | <b>ZFU</b> (National Central Office for Distance Learning)  |   |
| Sweden         | <b>Högskoleverket</b> (National Agency for Higher Education)  |   |
| Sweden         | <b>SYN</b> (Swedish Forestry Organisation)  | ?   |
| France         | <b>OPQF</b> (l'Office Professionnel de Qualification des Organismes de Formation)   |   |
| France         | Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche  |   |
| United Kingdom | <b>OUVS</b> (Open University Validation Services)   |   |
| United Kingdom | <b>BAOL</b> (British Association for Open Learning)   |   |
| USA            | <b>ABET</b> (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology)  |   |
| USA            | <b>DETC</b> (Distance Education & Training Council)   |   |
| Lithuania      | National Accreditation Body in Vilnius  | ?   |

## 4. Criteria of accreditation judgement

Which criteria are relevant for the judgement of an accreditation? All in all, the interviewees rank quality with a mean of 3,6 on the first place of a scale of importance, followed by market relevance and reputation of the accreditation body (mean: 2,8). Some interviewees even see two criteria as closely linked to each other: "If reputation of a accreditation body is high, than the quality is also high."

Of minor importance is the value for money of a given accreditation (2,3). Some of the interviewees predict that the criteria "reputation" will gain importance in the near future, assuming that accreditation will move mainstream and only a couple of accreditation bodies will achieve a good reputation in the end.

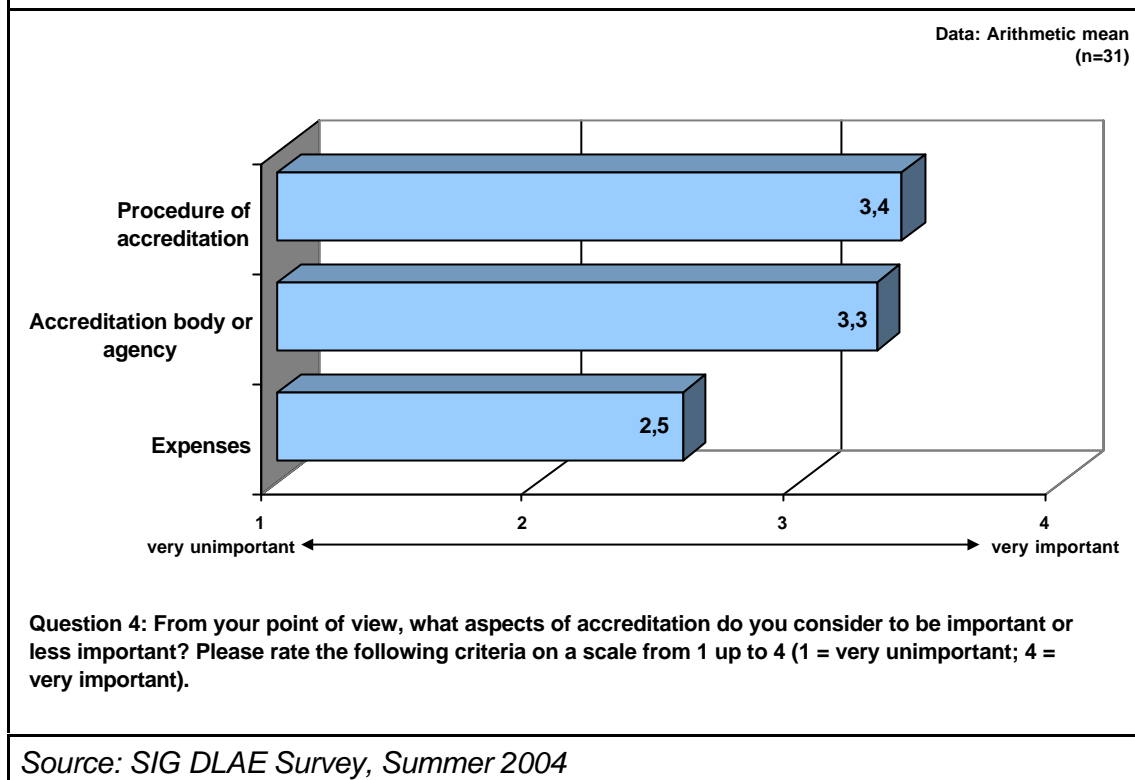
However, the comparison of the answers from public and private institutions shows substantial differences: Both groups set value on quality, but while the universities emphasise the reputation as another important criteria, the private providers of vocational training tend to judge the accreditation procedures stronger by their market-relevance. Value for money is not a very important judgement criteria – neither for the universities, nor for the private institutions.



## 5. Aspects of accreditation judgement

Interviewees point out that the accreditation procedure is of capital importance (mean 3,4), followed by the accreditation body or agency (3,3). In contrast, the expenses play a minor role (2,5). A separate analysis of the answers from universities and private providers of vocational training to this question shows no significant differences – except for the expenses of the accreditation which are more important for the universities.

In addition to the presented criteria several interviewees note two more aspects, which are of great relevance concerning the quality of accreditation: Accreditation has  
(1) to take into consideration the accredited organisation or contents and  
(2) to set up criteria which are consistent and not contradictory.

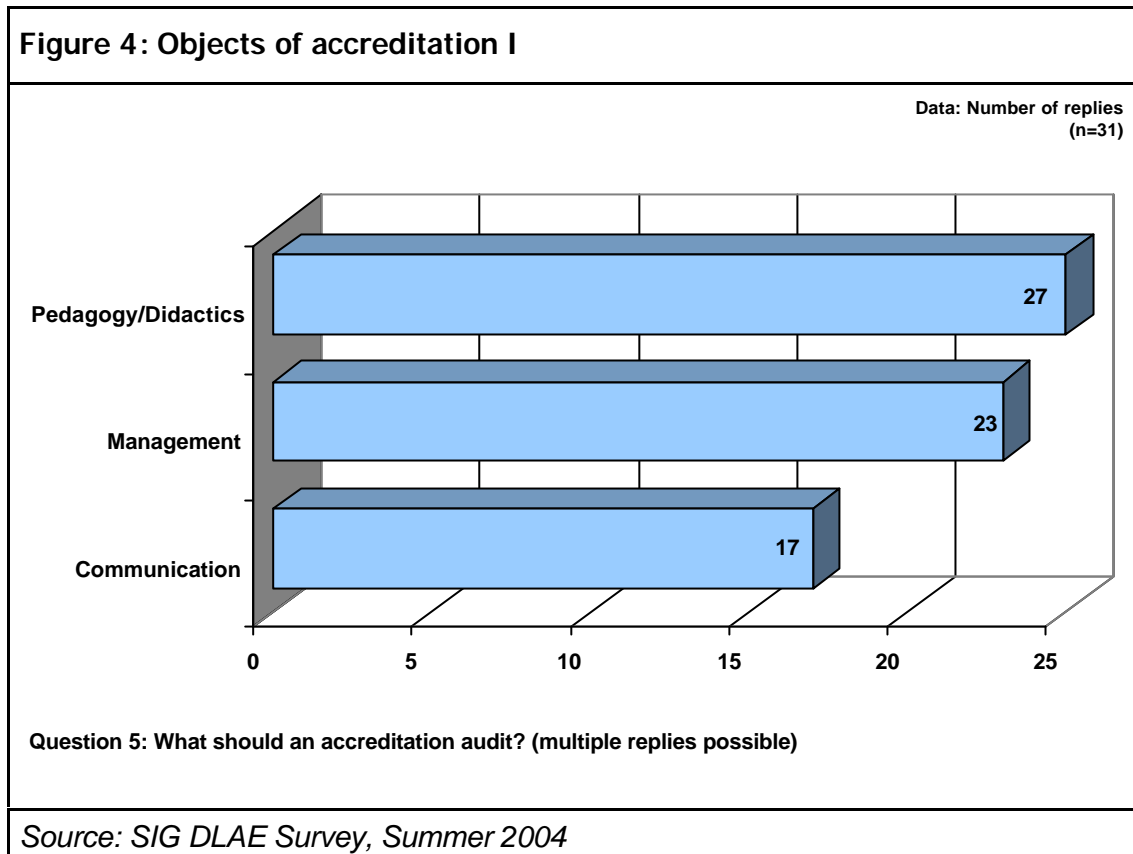
**Figure 3: Aspects of accreditation judgement**

## 6. Objects of accreditation

The interviewees agree on educational/didactical aspects of courses to be audited (named 27 times). Also the management of organisation or courses is often mentioned (23 times), whereas 17 answers account for communication.

The analysis of the additional remarks of our interviewed experts reveals that all three aspects belong together and should be considered in an audit. Thus, the interviewees refer to the complexity of educational processes, composed of trainer, learner, administration board of an educational organisation, the didactical arrangement, support of the learning process and the location where classroom learning takes place.

If interviewees had to decide on an accreditation object, the majority (26 experts) would prefer the course; 17 experts argue for the accreditation of the institution as a whole. Most of the private providers of vocational training who were interviewed vote for the accreditation of both: the institution and the course.

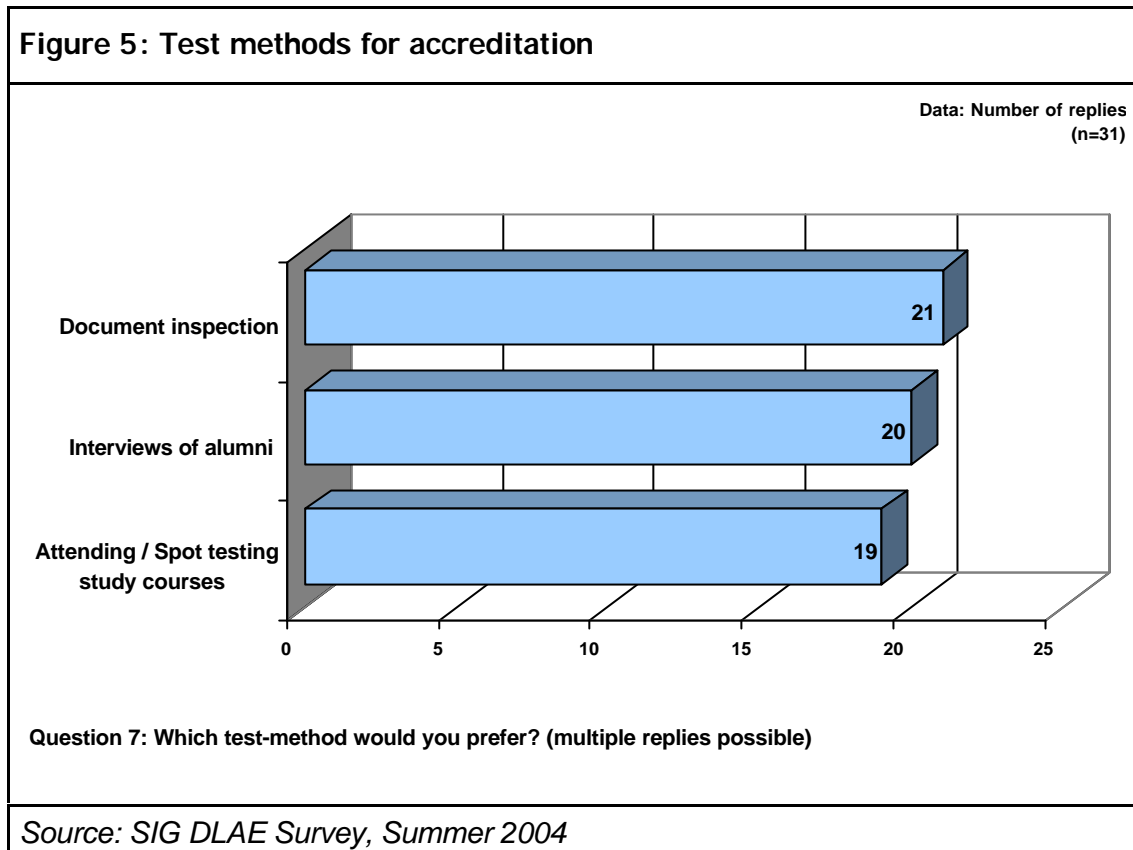


## 7. Test-methods for accreditation

The interviewees had the option to give multiple replies and chose all three given answers as preferred methods: The interviews of alumni gain 21 answers, the document inspection obtains 20 answers, and the attending or spot testing of study courses gets 19 answers.

By making their choice, the interviewees annotate that all methods have pros and cons; e.g. while questionnaires deliver subjective data, document inspection could be very time-consuming and expensive. Four interviewees even plead for a combination of the three given methods, and especially the universities propose some more test methods, such as:

- Interviews with students, teachers, pedagogical staff after having done the course and by comparing initial goals with the real goals achieved at the end of the programme;
- Interviews with managers/heads of department, department leaders etc.;
- Interviews of staff in order to evaluate congruency with operative up to strategic levels;
- Measure of delivered efficiency (not specified);
- Description of the course (form).



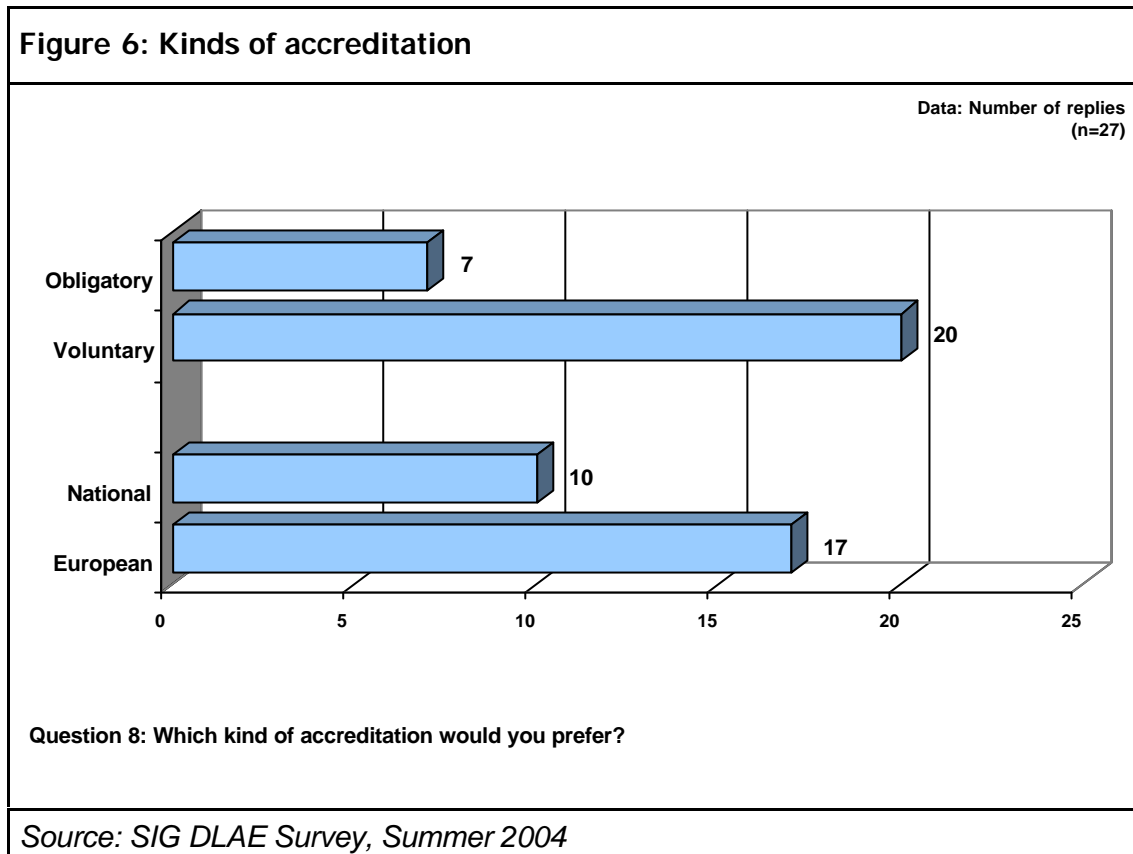
## 8. Kinds of accreditation

Clear without ambiguity are the answers referring to the questions, whether the interviewees prefer 1) an obligatory or voluntary accreditation and 2) a national or European accreditation.

1) The majority of the interviewees (20 out of 27) argue for a voluntary accreditation, only seven would support a mandatory accreditation. While the first group associates voluntary procedure with less bureaucracy and more customer orientation, the second group hopes that mandatory accreditation could improve the market relevance of accredited organisations or products and by that raise the standard of quality.

2) The figures for our second question, regarding kinds of accreditation, are nearly identical. The majority (17 out of 27 interviewees) pleads for a European accreditation, ten experts are in favour of a national accreditation (because it would take into account the regional distinctions). Another argument is that in an initial phase of accreditation a national approach could be helpful to move the topic ahead in terms of marketing. But on the long run one should go for an European perspective.

The majority pleading for a European accreditation are orientated on a European or international market and have these dimensions in mind. Only few interviewees plead for a combination of (the advantages of) national and European accreditation.



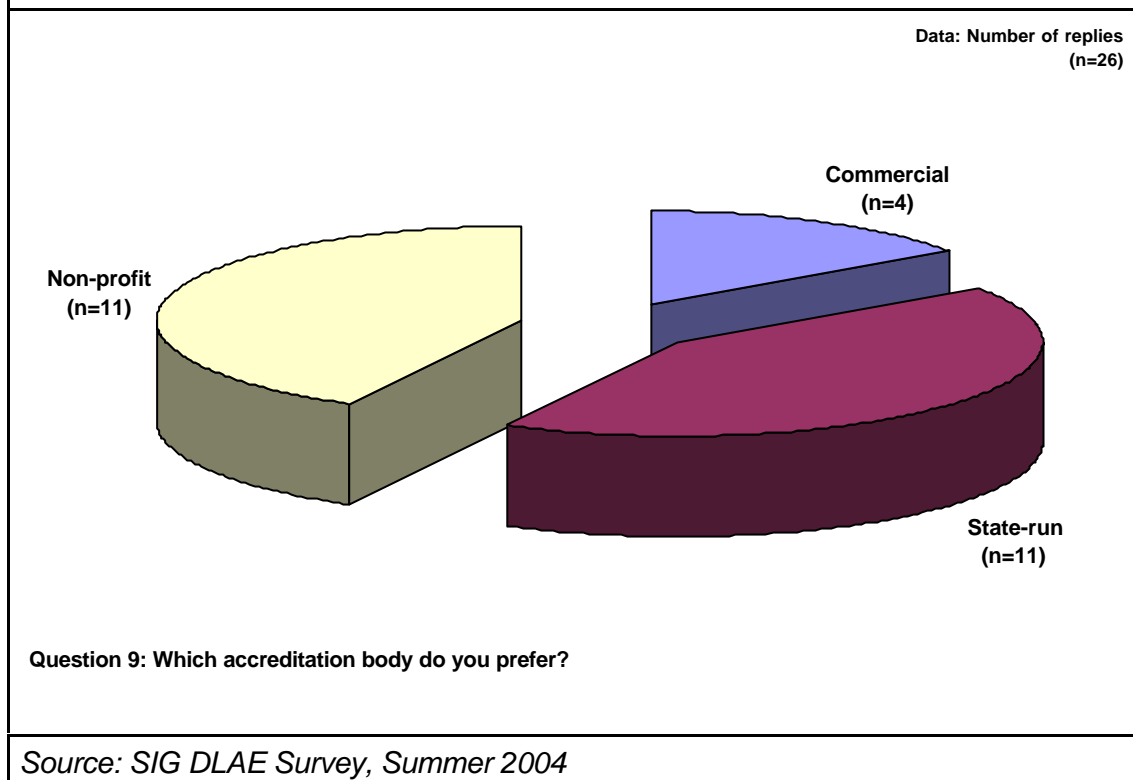
A comparison of the answers given by universities and private providers of vocational training reveals some differences: While the universities plead for a voluntary, European accreditation, the private institutions prefer a national accreditation and are undecided about the question whether accreditation should be mandatory or not.

## 9. Accreditation bodies

Eleven out of 26 interviewees, who give an answer to this question, prefer a non-profit accreditation body. A commensurate group of experts would rather be accredited by a state-run body, while only four interviewees prefer a commercial accreditation body.

However, the opinions of private and public institutions differ in this issue: The majority of the universities votes for a state-run or non-profit body, but the private providers of vocational training do not show any preference: At any one time, three of them plead for a state-run, non-profit and commercial accreditation body.

Independence and objectivity are the main arguments for a non-profit or a state-run agency. Could the state run agency include an immanent danger of bureaucracy, the (independent) non-profit agency could focus on the accreditation process and would not have to chalk up profits.

**Figure 7: Accreditation bodies**

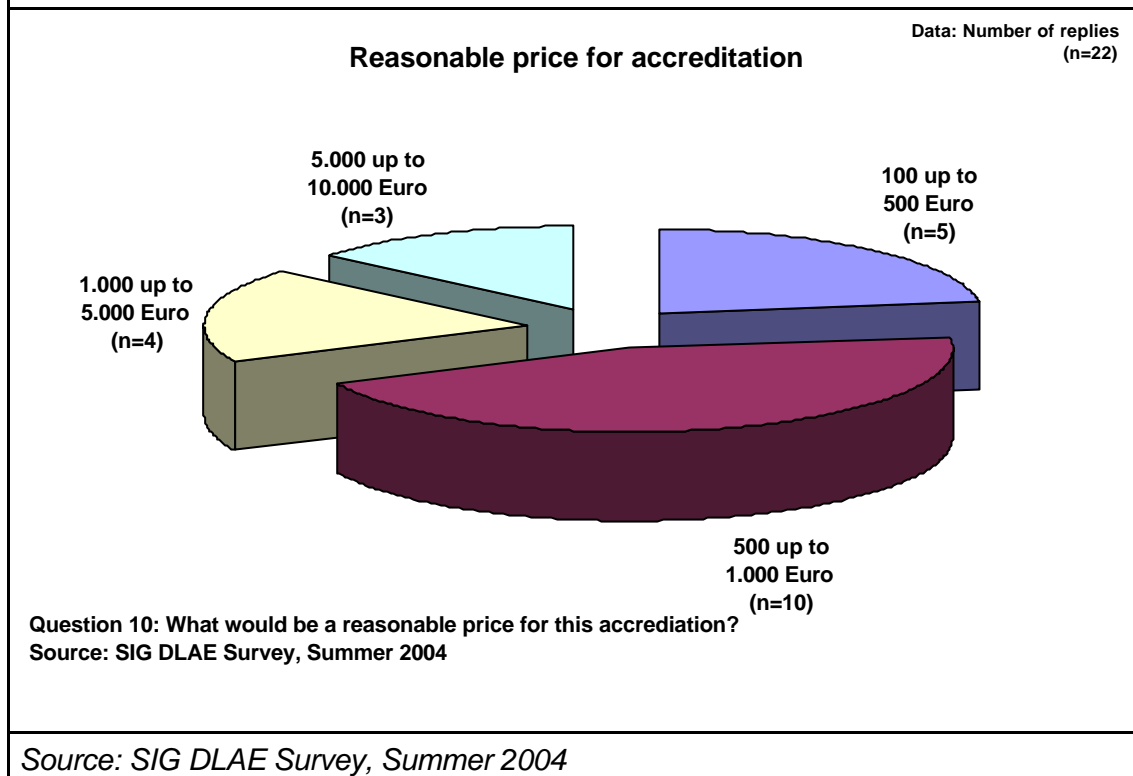
## 10. Reasonable price for accreditation

The most acceptable range of prices for accreditation varies from 500 up to 1.000 EUR (10 out of 22 answers to this question). Three experts substantiate their answers further, by relating this range to one course or one accreditation. As five interviewees would expend less than 500 EUR, four would pay more than 1.000 EUR but less than 5.000 EUR, and three would even go beyond that.

The interviewees often point out that costs depend to a great extent on the complexity of the accreditation procedure and could not be framed clearly. One interviewed expert suggests a dynamic model, in which the price of the accreditation is based on the price of the course (like ZFU). Some respondents warn, that high costs could reduce the competitiveness of small and medium-sized organisations, because they could not afford high expenses.

The reasonability of the price depends on several aspects:

- Accreditation object (course or institution)
- Number, volume and duration of the course(s)
- Expenditure of the accreditation

**Figure 8: Reasonable price for accreditation**

## 11. The perfect accreditation? – Problems and requirements

In addition to the queries mentioned in the questionnaire, the interviewees made some annotations: For example, they suggest to support the procedure of accreditation by checklists or manuals. Furthermore, some of the respondents have a clue about form and content: On the one hand the accreditation procedure should take its time to collect all relevant information about the course or institution, on the other hand the accreditation should mainly focus on the effectiveness of learning processes.

The **main problems of accreditation**, mentioned by the interviewees, are:

- External evaluators have external criteria which do not always fit with the realities of the institution
- Participants should be taken into account much stronger
- Standard definition of „quality“ is (still) missing
- E-learning is quite new to most of the evaluators, this leads to inconsistent criteria
- Extreme standardisation may lead to arbitrariness (anything can be accredited)
- Not always enough information about the reputation of the accreditation body (important for the acceptance in the market)
- The evaluator's pedagogical competencies should be as good as the provider's are

From the problems mentioned above, some **requirements on the optimal accreditation** can be derived. The accreditation should be:

- *Fast*, to make sure that the provider has no drawbacks in business;
- *Standardised*, but not too bureaucratic – to make it fast;
- *Transparent*, to make it comparable to others;
- *Affordable*, if an organisation or institution has proved a continual quality, the accreditation shouldn't testify each new offer again.

## 12. Summary

The aim of the survey was to provide an overview of accreditation activities of e-learning-providers in Europe in order to reveal trends, achievements and deficiencies. As the results indicate, the accreditation of e-learning-courses is not a common practice yet: Only half of the universities and half of the private providers of vocational training in our survey have accredited their courses so far. However, as every second of the other institutions intends to do this in the nearest future, accreditation is likely to become more usual within the next years. And even though only half of the interviewees endue experience in accreditation, most of the experts know at least one accreditation body – which can be interpreted as another indicator for the popularity of this issue.

If the interviewees had to judge an accreditation procedure, the most important criteria would be the quality, followed by market-relevance and reputation of the body. The value for money is of minor importance – for the universities as well as for the private institutions. Due to the growing importance of accreditation, the reputation of the body is predicted to become more important in the future. In general, judgement is focused on the procedure of accreditation as well as on the executing body or agency; expenses play a minor role.

The majority prefers the accreditation of single courses instead of the institution. Most interviewees agree about the relevant objects of accreditation by emphasising the importance of pedagogy and didactics. But also the management and the communication of the course, based on the opinion of many experts, should be taken into consideration. This finding refers to the complexity of educational processes – and their demand for adequate accreditation proceedings.

Document inspection, interviews of alumni and the attending/spot testing of study courses are some test-methods which could be used in accreditation processes. Most of the interviewees consider all three methods as suitable for this subject, some of them even plead for a combination. Additionally, the experts propose to do some interviews with managers, learners and pedagogical staff. In order to provide a wide range of different data, future accreditation processes should include interviews with several involved persons.

Asked for their preferred kind of accreditation, the private providers of vocational training plead – at least in the initial phase – for a national model. Referring to the

market-relevance of an accreditation, those interviewees are undecided about the question whether this should be mandatory or not. The voting of experts working in universities is quite different: Most of them share the opinion that an accreditation has to be voluntary and European. And even if a national perspective could help to take regional distinctions into consideration, the majority estimates the European accreditation as the future model.

With the objective to ensure an independent and uncommitted accreditation, most of the interviewed experts vote for a non-profit or state-run agency. Because of their profit-orientation and doubtful neutrality, commercial agencies are widely refused.

The most acceptable range of prices for accreditation varies from 500 up to 1.000 EUR. However, interviewees point out that the reasonability of the price depends on several factors, such as the accreditation object (course/institution), the number, volume and duration of the course(s) and the expenditure of the accreditation. For this reason, the “optimal” price can not be framed clearly.

In addition to the questions asked in the interview, the participants made some annotations to the problems and requirements of accreditation, e.g. the lack of a unique definition of “quality” or the apprehension of an extreme standardisation, which may lead to arbitrariness. Interviewees also point out the necessity to provide enough information on the reputation of the agency and the competencies of the assessors.

After all: If there is a perfect accreditation – what are its characteristics? Derived from the results of our survey so far, the accreditation should be: fast, standardised, transparent and affordable.

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