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Author: Lyudmila Kovaleva

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Quality of Education in Kazakhstani Universities: Real or Not Real?

LYUDMILA KOVALEVA

The quality of education in the sector of higher education has been one of the key priorities of the government for the last decade. In order to assure the quality of education and produce highly qualified human resources, the country needs to have an effective tool for assessing the activities of higher education institutions. Successful international experiences and the need to integrate into the European Higher Education Area urged Kazakhstan to introduce the procedure of external accreditation by independent quality assurance agencies. To understand the effectiveness of the external accreditation in the framework of Kazakhstani context, there is a need to contemplate the issues of the general concept of quality, overall procedure of quality assurance as well as its strong and weak points. While there are ongoing debates about the efficiency of quality assurance agencies and their impact on quality of education, it is important to realize that the internal quality within universities cannot be assured by the means of external review alone. In summary, this article argues that the process of assuring the quality of education in Kazakhstani institutions has to be a cooperative attempt of both quality assurance agencies and educational organizations. Therefore, the culture of quality and attitudes of society, policy-makers and universities towards quality assurance agencies is an important issue for discussion.

Keywords: quality assurance, external accreditation, quality assurance agency, evaluation, standards, higher education

Introduction

The quality of education in a modern knowledge-based economy should be regarded as a key to the well-being and advancement of the country. Kazakhstan, as one of the developing countries, which strives to be one of the 30 most developed countries by 2050, has already started an ambitious policy of training highly-qualified professionals at all levels of education, including primary, secondary, vocational, higher, and post-graduate education.

The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan (hereinafter – MES RK, the Ministry) acknowledges the fact that the achievement of qualitative indicators is especially important at the levels of higher and post-graduate education (NCEPA, 2014). In particular, innovative development of the economy and training of competitive human resources is directly related to the quality of knowledge and skills delivered at the level of higher education. Therefore, the Ministry of Education and Science set implicit goals for the improvement of the quality of higher education in its Strategic Plan for 2014-2018. In this sense, the major role for evaluating the quality of higher education institutions has been delegated to national and international quality assurance agencies, which are approved by the Ministry and included in the National Register of accreditation agencies (MES, 2014). The independence of these agencies is believed to assure transparency and objectivity of accreditation procedures and to foster the culture of cooperation rather than control.

Nevertheless, there are several issues concerning the introduction of the external quality assurance in Kazakhstan, which have to be critically analyzed in order to understand how effectively accreditation agencies assure quality education in Kazakhstani universities. First, the procedure of external accreditation by quality assurance agencies is still new to Kazakhstani higher education institutions, which are used to comply with standard requirements of the state attestation conducted by the MES RK. This distrust and fear of accreditation agencies create situations when universities try to ‘please’ external experts by hiding all faults in their practices and showing only the good sides of their work (Bishimbayev & Nurasheva, 2012). As a result, these universities do not have the opportunity to objectively analyze and assess their weaknesses or to receive valuable recommendations from experts on improvement of their educational activities.

Moreover, under the present situation of affairs, when Kazakhstan is actively involved in ‘Europeanization’ of education, universities have to adopt simultaneous changes, which do not match with the state regulations set by the MES. In specific, the obligations put on Kazakhstani universities after the entrance into European Higher Education Area required them to change the whole system of their operation by introducing the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the three-tier system of education, and diploma supplements (OECD, 2007). In other words, too many simultaneous innovations still make it hard for higher education institutions to keep up with the demands of the Bologna Process, the requirements of the Ministry, standards for quality provision from external accreditation agencies, and their own internal quality assurance systems.

Having said that, the question arises as to whether higher education institutions in Kazakhstan are able to provide quality education or they simply comply with endless requirements and standards. To understand this, it is necessary to analyze the following questions:

- 1) What is the quality of education and how it should be evaluated?
- 2) Who is responsible for evaluating the quality of education in Kazakhstan?
- 3) Do these organizations indeed assure the quality of education or it is just an illusion?

The Meaning of Quality Education

Quality is a very controversial concept, which cannot be touched, seen, or perceived. Moreover, quality can mean absolutely different things to many people. Quality of education, for instance, is one of the most difficult ‘dimensions’ to measure. It is interesting to note that in spite of the complexity of the phenomenon of quality, there are a great number of groups who feel qualified to measure it: parents, employers, students, teachers, representatives of educational organizations, media, government, and others. Paradoxically, all these groups tend to see quality in their own interpretation and demand from educational organizations things, which cannot be achieved by the means of quality assurance (Boland, 2013; Hopper, 2007).

Boland (2013) identifies five groups of stakeholders within the area of quality assurance of education: students, academic staff, governments, employers, and society. All these groups have different understandings of the meaning of quality education. For example, a student measures quality education by the degree to which it develops his or her professional skills and fosters personal development. Academic staff understands the quality education as the outcomes of their teaching in the form of graduates’ achievements and further transmission of their professional knowledge. Governments measure quality education by its capacity to prepare human resources necessary for economic prosperity of the country. For employers, the meaning of the quality education equals to graduates’ readiness to work. Finally, society see the quality education in the reflection of all listed meanings, including an additional criteria of “creating better places to live” (p. 57) by training highly-qualified staff. It is evident to see that each group of stakeholders requires its own benefit from the quality education and, therefore, makes it even more complicated to understand how to assess quality in educational organizations.

Yakubova (2009) in her empirical study argues that apart from external stakeholders, the internal stakeholders within higher education institutions also perceive quality education using different criteria. She found that the meaning of the quality education “varies at upper administrative level, institutional level, and student level” (p. 30). By upper administrative level the researcher refers mostly to the Ministry of Education and Science. As she defines it, the quality education in their perspective is characterized by the existence of the international recognition, participation in international projects as well as the inclusion in foreign networks. In other words, the quality of education in this term equals to the promotion of international criteria for education excellence and adoption of best international practices. As for institutional representatives, including administration and academic staff, they see quality education through the lenses of material and technical provision of the institution, availability of professional teaching staff, and opportunities for mobility of students and academic personnel. Students, who should be regarded the main customers of higher education institutions, mostly focus their understanding of quality education on “employability” opportunities, “practicality of the knowledge,” “academic freedom,” and “learning environment” (p. 36).

As it is seen, there is no universal meaning of quality education, which creates ambiguity in assuring the quality in educational organizations. In this review, the main focus is given to the analysis of procedures of quality assurance in Kazakhstan and the role of quality assurance agencies in providing quality education at higher education institutions.

Quality Assurance Agencies and Procedure of Accreditation in Kazakhstan

The quality of education in Kazakhstani higher education institutions is assured by national independent agencies, which conduct procedures of external accreditation. The first experience of introducing accreditation in Kazakhstan happened in 2001 (Kalabayev, 2008). Until that time, higher education institutions had to undergo the procedure of the state attestation. The procedure of the state attestation in Kazakhstan was widely criticized due to its nature of compliance, quantitative nature of assessment, and centralized control from the Ministry of Education and Science. The whole concept of the state attestation was built on the compliance with bureaucratic procedures required by the Ministry. The concept of accreditation, on the contrary, inculcated the ideas of continuous improvement of educational organizations and cooperation with accreditation agencies (OECD, 2007).

Unfortunately, the first experience of accreditation turned out to be a ‘disaster’ due to its quantitative rather than qualitative nature and the failure to consider specific peculiarities of the Kazakhstani system of education. As a result, accreditation was assumed to be an inefficient approach for assessing the quality of higher education institutions and was again replaced by the state attestation (Kalabayev, 2008). Nevertheless, almost a decade later, and after continuous analyses of international experiences, accreditation was again “revived” in Kazakhstan. In fact, the main and ‘urgent’ reason for introducing external accreditation instead of the state attestation in Kazakhstan was based on the initiative of Kazakhstan to join the Bologna Process in 2010 (OECD, 2007). According to the membership obligations to countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), accreditation of higher education institutions has to be conducted by independent quality assurance agencies. Thus, the state attestation, which is fully coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Science, had to be replaced with the external accreditation conducted by independent quality assurance agencies.

As a result, external accreditation became one of the priorities for Kazakhstani education, and in 2011, it was officially introduced in accordance with the State Program of Education Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020 (MES, 2010). In 2012, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan officially vested non-profit non-governmental organizations with the rights to conduct accreditation of higher education institutions and colleges in Kazakhstan. The main document, which regulates activities of quality assurance agencies in Kazakhstan, is “Rules and Requirements for National Registers of Accreditation Institutions, Accredited Education Institutions, and Education Programs” (MES, 2011).

The procedure of external accreditation in Kazakhstan is one of the government’s prioritized but inconsistent initiatives. During the early stages of establishment of the external accreditation, the government set high indicators for its future implementation. In particular, it was planned to have 50% and 65% of institutionally accredited universities by 2015 and 2020 respectively. As for specialized accreditation of educational programs, these indicators constituted 20% and 30%. Moreover, it was intended to fully replace the state attestation of universities and colleges with external national accreditation by 2015 (MES, 2010).

The percentage of universities which had passed external institutional accreditation by 2013 was 40.4%. The most interest in passing accreditation was demonstrated by the state universities and institutes (NCEPA, 2014, p. 194). However, the initiative to fully replace state attestation with external accreditation was shifted from 2015 to 2017 due to the concerns of the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan regarding the competencies of independent quality assurance agencies (MES, 2014).

While the Ministry of Education and Science allowed independent quality assurance agencies to conduct accreditation, it reserved its rights to select quality assurance agencies by including them in the National Register of Accreditation Agencies. In particular, even though the Ministry does not control the process of accreditation, it has the rights to impose requirements to foreign and national accreditation agencies. At present, the National Register of Agencies includes 10 quality assurance agencies, two of which are national agencies: Independent Kazakh Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (IQAA) and Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating of the Republic of Kazakhstan (IAAR) (Kalanova, 2013).

Each of these two Kazakhstani agencies has its own standards for institutional and specialized (program) accreditation, which are developed in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (NCEPA, 2013). The process of accreditation has a clear and organized structure. Compared to the process of the state attestation, accreditation is supposed to help universities improve their internal quality prior to the visit of the group of experts from the agency. Specifically, after applying for a procedure of accreditation, a university has to draft a self-assessment report. This report is supposed to reflect the management of the university, its mission, strategies and goals, culture of quality, material and technical bases concerning the university. Thus, the first stage of accreditation focuses on self-reflection of universities, which is supposed to help them analyze their own weaknesses and strengths, as well as threats and opportunities for further development. It is important to note that this report has to be drafted in a joint cooperation of the faculty, administrative staff, and students in order to see a full picture of the university state (Kalanova, 2013).

As soon as this report is completed, it is sent to the agency for consideration, revision, and identification of inaccuracies. When the report is corrected and adjusted to standards, the agency sends a group of experts for a procedure of external review. The group of experts is usually comprised of five to eight people, including an international expert, a representative of employers, and a student. The members of the group of experts are selected on the basis of their academic degrees, ranks, and working experiences in the field of higher education. The procedure of external review lasts for two to three days depending on the volume of work and number of educational programs. In brief, the work of experts is mostly focused on examining higher education institutions

for compliance with their self-assessment reports and providing recommendations based on observation and analysis (Zakirova, 2010).

The final stage of the external review includes a process of drafting reports by the members of the group of experts and a further analysis of these reports by the Accreditation Council of the agency. The Accreditation Council is a group of external representatives from the Ministry, other governmental organizations, representatives of employers, international experts and students. In its turn, the Accreditation Council of the agency can make one of three decisions in regard to universities or colleges which underwent the procedure of accreditation: to accredit the university for five years, to provide an accreditation with conditions for three years, or to postpone accreditation (Kalanova, 2013).

In general, the procedure of accreditation seems to be an efficient way of assuring the quality of education in Kazakhstani universities. The national quality assurance agencies took the previous mistakes into account, analyzed international experience, and cooperated with foreign agencies and organizations. However, there is a need for a deeper and more critical look at this procedure and analysis of its efficiency, problems, and areas for improvement.

Quality of Education and its Assurance in Kazakhstani Universities

Having analyzed the meaning of the quality and the procedure of accreditation in Kazakhstan, it is now possible to assess the real state of the quality assurance of education in Kazakhstani universities. Overall, if looking at the procedure of quality assurance in Kazakhstan superficially, one can find no serious shortcomings: well-defined standards, clear structure of the procedure, external opinions, continuous support of universities, and constant improvement due to the cooperation with international quality assurance agencies, organizations, and networks.

Nevertheless, the reality shows that the quality of education of graduates from successfully accredited universities is far from being excellent. High unemployment of young Kazakhstani graduates is mostly explained by the low satisfaction of many employers with the knowledge and skills of recent students (Bishimbayev & Nurasheva, 2014, p. 6). Moreover, according to the Global Competitiveness Report 2014-2015, Kazakhstan holds a low position on the rating of higher education and training. In particular, it maintains the 76th place among the other 144 countries for the indicator of “the quality of the education system” (Schwab, 2014, p.231). And the question which comes to mind is “Who is responsible for the low quality of education in the sector of higher education in Kazakhstan—universities, which do not provide quality education, or quality assurance agencies, which accredit these universities?”

In order to answer this question and to work on the improvement of education in Kazakhstan, there is a need to acknowledge the existence of problems and to understand the roots of their appearance. The first possible reason for incomplete efficiency of accreditation in Kazakhstan is rooted in false perceptions of accreditation as a type of control rather than assistance in improvement. The representatives of higher education institutions, mainly rectors and heads of departments, tend to regard the external accreditation as a threat to reputation and activities of their educational organizations. As OECD (2007) indicates in its report, the previous procedure of the state attestation left negative ‘imprints’ regarding any types of evaluations. In particular, higher education institutions in Kazakhstan nowadays hold a culture of compliance and control cultivated during the previous experiences of the state attestation (NUGSE, 2014). More importantly, many representatives from HEIs including administration and academia, still do not understand the difference between state attestation and external accreditation.

The process of “moving from quality control to quality improvement” is supposed to take a substantial amount of time and work from the side of quality assurance agencies (OECD, 2007, p. 202). In this regard, quality assurance agencies have to provide more educational seminars and workshops for faculty, students, and administration, which will give them insights into the real purpose of accreditation. Specifically, all stakeholders need to be aware of the fact that accreditation has to be regarded as an opportunity for universities to improve their activities with the help of the professional external review. This understanding may help to resolve many issues concerning the procedure of accreditation. For example, it is highly unlikely that universities will draft a self-evaluation report in a joint-cooperation of the faculty, administration, and students. Due to the overload of work and bureaucratic structure of management, a self-assessment report of the university is, most probably, written by one or two representatives of the university without much awareness and participation of other university staff and students. Therefore, self-assessment reports should not be considered a basis for the external review since it cannot reflect the real picture within the university and can even “color the truth” about university activities.

One of the good sides of accreditation is the procedure of interviews with university students, graduates, faculty, and employers of the university (Zakirova, 2010). However, these interviews also may present certain omissions in terms of their reliability. The first issue with interviews is the fact that these groups of interviewees do not entirely understand the concept of quality or perceive it in different terms. For example, students can understand the quality of their study as timely lectures, qualified teaching staff, or provision of equipment for study. Meanwhile, employers of universities may confuse personal qualities of their employees with their professional skills and knowledge received at educational organization. As a result, it is unclear whether interviewing is an effective way of assessing the quality of education at universities.

As a solution to this possible distortion of facts due to different perceptions of the quality, quality assurance agencies in Kazakhstan have to work more on cooperation with different stakeholders, including students, employers, and university representatives. Students as *direct customers* of higher education institutions have to be aware of their rights on quality education and to be actively involved in the process of external evaluations of their universities.

Overall, it can be stated that quality assurance agencies take great risks and great responsibilities by accrediting higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. Firstly, it is a matter of the objectivity since different stakeholders rely on the results of accreditation and ranking of higher education institutions and colleges in Kazakhstan. In particular, quality assurance agencies are responsible for results of their accreditation procedures and have to provide stakeholders with a clear picture of educational services in various educational institutions. Secondly, quality assurance agencies have to be extremely transparent and cautious in their activities. More specifically, the trust of different stakeholders means a lot and requires quality assurance agencies to be flexible and accountable to all stakeholders by using different means: websites, media, social networks, and others.

At the same time, quality assurance agencies are not able to guarantee the quality of education in higher education institutions. The role of quality assurance agencies is not even in assuring the quality of educational organizations, but in assessing their opportunities and capabilities for providing quality education, and in recommending improvement of their activities. In this regard, turning back to the question “Who is responsible for the low quality of education in the sector of higher education of Kazakhstan,” the answer is obvious - higher education institutions, which do not provide the real evidence of their activities during the procedures of accreditation and hide their deficiencies. Therefore, there will be no tangible results in the provision of quality education in Kazakhstan until higher education institutions perceive quality assurance agencies as their partners and facilitators in quality enhancement.

Conclusion

The quality of education in higher education institutions is an important factor for the well-being of the country. The aim of this review was to question the existence of quality education in Kazakhstani higher education institutions and to analyze the ways for assuring and providing quality in educational organizations. To answer these questions, this article was divided into three sections dedicated to the meaning of quality in education, quality assurance agencies in Kazakhstan, and their capacity to assure and to provide the quality education in Kazakhstani universities and academies.

The process of quality assurance in the field of higher education in Kazakhstan is at the early stage of its development. Higher education institutions in Kazakhstan still have ‘prejudices’ regarding accreditation and associate it with an attempt to find only deficiencies in their activities. In addition, the procedure of external accreditation itself has its shortcomings, which need to be resolved by the means of cooperative efforts of all involved stakeholders: agencies, government, employers, and students.

While there are ongoing arguments whether quality assurance agencies can effectively assure the quality of educational organizations, it is important to remember that the responsibility for providing quality education lies entirely with institutions themselves. Quality assurance agencies, in their turn, are responsible for evaluating how well institutions are prepared to execute their roles and providing them with expert recommendations on improving their operations.

To conclude, the quality of education in higher education institutions remains highly problematic. The evidence shows that the majority of Kazakhstani graduates have poor knowledge and skills inadequate to be competitive in the world arena. Unfortunately, the procedure of accreditation cannot assure the overall quality of education, but only demonstrates general quality indicators. To improve this situation, it is necessary to change attitudes of higher education institutions towards the procedure of external accreditation. In addition, quality assurance agencies in Kazakhstan need to maintain more support and trust from the government and society,

and to encourage different stakeholders to be active in the process of quality assurance of Kazakhstani universities.

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