

**Stakeholders' Perceptions of International Accreditation in a Private School  
in Astana: A qualitative study**

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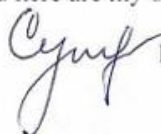
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## Ethical Approval



53 Kabanbay Batyr Ave.  
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Date: 28 of October, 2024

Dear: Daniyar Sutzhanov

This letter now confirms that your research project titled “The Stakeholders’ Perceptions of International Accreditation in Private Schools in Astana” has been approved by the Graduate School of Education, pending the minor changes as specified by the reviewer with final official approval to be given by the advisor.

You may proceed with contacting your preferred research site and commencing your participant recruitment strategy.

Yours sincerely,

Duishon Shamatov

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With Kind Regards,

Daniyar Sutzhanov

## **Abstract**

### **“Stakeholders’ Perceptions of International Accreditation in a Private School in Astana”: A qualitative study**

This qualitative case study explores stakeholder perceptions of international accreditation in a private secondary school in Kazakhstan. The research investigates motivations, perceived benefits and drawbacks, challenges encountered during the process, and the extent to which accreditation is understood as a mechanism for continuous improvement.

Semi-structured interviews with nine stakeholders—including owners, leaders, teachers, and parents—revealed significant differences in perceptions across groups. Owners primarily viewed accreditation as a marketing tool, leaders as a means for strategic development, teachers as an opportunity for professional growth, and parents associated it mainly with access to international universities.

The study identified key challenges such as financial burdens, limited adaptability of international standards to the local context, resistance to change, and low parental engagement. Additionally, accreditation is often perceived as an external inspection rather than a tool for systemic development.

The findings provide insights for improving communication strategies, aligning stakeholder motivations, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement within schools undergoing accreditation.

## Аннотация

### **"Астанадағы жеке мектепте стейкхолдерлердің халықаралық аккредиттеуді қабылдауы"**

Бұл сапалы зерттеу Қазақстандағы жеке орта мектебінде стейкхолдерлердің халықаралық аккредиттеуді қабылдауын зерттеуге арналған. Зерттеу қатысушылардың мотивацияларын, аккредиттеудің қабылданған артықшылықтары мен кемшіліктерін, оны өту процесінде туындайтын қиындықтарды, сондай-ақ аккредиттеуді үздіксіз жетілдіру механизмі ретінде түсіну дәрежесін қарастырады.

Тоғыз стейкхолдермен — мектеп иелерімен, басшылармен, мұғалімдермен және ата — аналармен жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттар олардың аккредиттеуді қабылдауында айтарлықтай айырмашылықтарды анықтады. Иелері аккредиттеуді ең алдымен маркетинг құралы, басшылар — стратегиялық даму құралы, мұғалімдер — кәсіби өсу мүмкіндігі ретінде қарастырды, ал ата-аналар негізінен аккредиттеуді балалардың шетелдік жоғары оқу орындарына түсу мүмкіндігімен байланыстырды.

Зерттеу қаржылық жүктемені, халықаралық стандарттардың жергілікті контекстке шектеулі бейімделуін, өзгерістерге төзімділікті және ата-аналардың аз қатысуын қоса алғанда, негізгі қиындықтарды анықтады. Сонымен қатар, аккредиттеу көбінесе жүйені дамыту құралы ретінде емес, сыртқы тексеру ретінде қабылданады.

Алынған нәтижелер коммуникациялық стратегияларды жақсарту, стейкхолдерлердің уәждемелерін үйлестіру және аккредиттеуден өтіп жатқан мектептерде тұрақты жетілдіру мәдениетін қалыптастыру жөнінде ұсыныстар беруге мүмкіндік береді.

## Аннотация

### **«Восприятие международной аккредитации стейкхолдерами в частной школе в Астане»: качественное исследование**

Данное качественное исследование посвящено изучению восприятия международной аккредитации стейкхолдерами в частной школе Казахстана. В исследовании рассматриваются мотивации участников, воспринимаемые преимущества и недостатки аккредитации, сложности, возникающие в процессе её прохождения, а также степень понимания аккредитации как механизма постоянного улучшения.

Полуструктурированные интервью с девятью стейкхолдерами — владельцами школы, руководителями, учителями и родителями — выявили значительные различия в их восприятии аккредитации. Владельцы рассматривали аккредитацию прежде всего как маркетинговый инструмент, руководители — как средство стратегического развития, учителя — как возможность профессионального роста, а родители в основном связывали аккредитацию с возможностью поступления детей в зарубежные вузы.

В ходе исследования были выявлены ключевые сложности, включая финансовую нагрузку, ограниченную адаптацию международных стандартов к местному контексту, сопротивление изменениям и низкую вовлечённость родителей. Кроме того, аккредитация часто воспринимается как внешняя проверка, чем как инструмент системного развития.

Полученные результаты позволяют дать рекомендации по улучшению коммуникационных стратегий, согласованию мотиваций стейкхолдеров и формированию культуры постоянного совершенствования в школах, проходящих аккредитацию.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### ***Background to the Study***

In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, schools increasingly strive to uphold high standards of teaching and learning. In Kazakhstan, schools may undergo national accreditation or participate in external monitoring of educational achievements, which provides a localized framework for assuring quality (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021). To enhance and maintain quality, many schools also employ external, independent assessment mechanisms, among which international accreditation is a prominent example.

International accreditation, while defined in various ways, generally refers to a process through which an educational institution or program is evaluated and formally recognized for meeting or exceeding predetermined standards of academic excellence (Ibrahim, 2014).

The popularity of international accreditation has grown substantially in recent decades. According to ISC Research (2024), the number of international accredited schools increased from 2,584 in 2000 to 14,010 in 2024. Over the past five years alone, international schools have experienced an 8.5% increase in numbers and a 10% increase in student enrollment, signaling a global commitment to recognized markers of educational quality (ISC Research, 2024). As stated by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (2004), accreditation has come to symbolize “a mark of quality in education” (p. 1).

Kazakhstan reflects this global trend, with a growing number of private schools pursuing international accreditation as a means to align with international standards and expand educational opportunities for students.

All 20 schools in the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) network – established in 2008 as a model of educational innovation - have obtained accreditation from the Council of International Schools (CIS), affirming Kazakhstan's commitment to global educational excellence (Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, 2024). NIS schools offer trilingual education

(Kazakh, Russian and English), emphasizing STEM disciplines, research-based learning, and the development of critical thinking and leadership skills. In addition to NIS, several other schools in Kazakhstan have received international accreditation, including Miras International School, QSI International School of Astana, Almaty International School, Haileybury Almaty, Spectrum International School, and a number of others, reflecting the country's growing alignment with global educational standards.

The history of the emergence of international accreditation is closely connected with the history of international schools. With increasing globalization in the mid-20th century, the mobility of families and professionals created a demand for educational institutions offering internationally recognized programs (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). As the number of international schools grew, so did the need for standardized quality assurance frameworks. This was essential to ensure educational consistency, align curricula, and maintain coherence in teaching methodologies and assessment practices. With the growing emphasis on consistently high education standards, international accreditation organizations emerged. They began to develop criteria for evaluating the performance of schools worldwide and establishing their own accreditation procedures.

Although different accrediting bodies may have nuanced approaches, the core structure of the accreditation process remains similar. Major agencies such as Cognia, CIS, NEASC, and MSACS typically require schools to engage in self-assessment, provide evidence, submit comprehensive reports, and respond to recommendations from evaluators (Coutet, 2022). These unified standards serve as quality benchmarks across diverse educational settings. The status of an internationally accredited school implies that it meets international standards, signifying the high quality of its educational programs, access to extensive learning resources and best teaching practices, developed infrastructure, a commitment to continuous improvement, and more.

Different school stakeholders have their own perceptions and expectations regarding pursuing international accreditation. As noted previously, for most students and their parents, this accreditation is a hallmark of quality and an opportunity to gain admission to foreign universities upon graduation. School administrators and owners must pay much attention to parental satisfaction with the school. Thus, Coutet (2022) highlights that “parent satisfaction is an important factor driving schools to seek accreditation” (p. 106). In the meantime, many owners of private schools see accreditation as a purely financial opportunity: increasing the estimated value of the school or attracting additional investments. Adiyaman and Özmantar (2023) noted that private schools manage their budgets and strive to make a difference in the competitive market via accreditation. Meanwhile, school educators view international accreditation as a chance for personal and professional advancement (Ibrahim et al., 2015).

It is important to note that the motivations of school stakeholders to obtain international accreditation largely depend on the context in which the school is located. In most cases, decisions to apply for accreditation are voluntary and related to “the desire to achieve the kitemark of accreditation” (Fertig, 2007, p.335). The author further notes that this desire is often driven by instilling a sense of “school improvement” within the institution. In some countries around the world, there are instances where national legislation mandates schools to undergo international accreditation. For example, in some countries, all private schools are required to achieve international accreditation to ensure high-quality education and adherence to international standards. In Dubai for example, both public and private schools must obtain accreditation to continue operating.

The state's regulation of international schools can variably influence school owners' and administrators' perspectives on pursuing international accreditation. Hayden and Thompson (2008, p.9) noted that "some countries adopt a laissez-faire attitude and allow them to develop like any other independent private school." In contrast, as the authors stress, some countries

take a more regulatory approach by limiting the number of such schools and establishing norms that schools must meet before receiving approval.

The regulation of international schools' activities can also serve as a powerful incentive for stakeholders to pursue international accreditation. In accordance with the legislation of most countries, international schools are permitted to implement independent educational programs. Autonomy in choosing an educational program provides international schools with flexibility, innovations, international recognition, and increased competitiveness in the educational market.

Another context in which motivations for stakeholders to seek accreditation may vary is the ownership structure of the school. Usually, there is little motivation for public schools to pursue the status of being internationally accredited. Adiyaman and Özmantar (2023, p.175) note that “the financial costs of accreditation make it unattainable for public schools.” In contrast, private schools, engaged in fierce competition for students and their parents, perceive acquiring this status as an additional competitive advantage. It signals to the public the high standards of education offered by the school.

Given that my research will focus on stakeholders' perceptions of private schools in Kazakhstan regarding international accreditation, it is essential to provide context about Kazakhstan. Over recent decades, there has been a steady increase in the number of international private schools in the country (Zakon.kz, 2024). This growth can be attributed largely to government support for private schools to fulfill the national policy of ensuring adequate educational opportunities for children. A vital form of this support has been per capita funding (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024) because it links government funding directly to the number of students enrolled. This encourages schools to increase enrollment by providing a set amount of funding for each student. This financial support helps private schools grow and thrive by offering a steady source of income, which

they can use to improve infrastructure, hire skilled staff, and maintain high educational standards. Additionally, this funding model promotes competition among schools, driving better academic results and fostering innovation in teaching.

Operating within a competitive environment where funding is tied to student enrollment, private schools continuously strive to enhance their reputation, image, educational practices, and opportunities. Therefore, international accreditation in Kazakhstan remains voluntary, with owners and managers of private schools often motivated to gain a competitive edge, using accreditation as a public relations tool or a quality mark that distinguishes their institution from others (Hayden & Thompson, 2013).

The notable exception is the NIS (Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools) network. For NIS schools, obtaining accreditation from the Council of International Schools (CIS) was mandatory. It was crucial to showcase their capability to transmit best practices and gain recognition within the global educational community.

In Kazakhstan, legislation generally does not impede the establishment of international schools. According to the Law on Education (Adilet, 2024), the status of an international school allows educational institutions not to adopt the national educational program but rather to implement an independent curriculum. To attain this status, among other requirements, a school must be authorized by the International Baccalaureate Organization or obtain international institutional accreditation such as CIS accreditation. Subsequently, the school must undergo a series of state procedures, including submitting an application to the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan and having the application reviewed by a special commission (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024).

Studying the factors influencing school stakeholders' motivation to pursue international accreditation helps researchers address the question of the primary benefits of being internationally accredited. However, some stakeholders tend to perceive international

accreditation negatively, particularly regarding its impact on standardization, innovation, individuality, and creativity. For example, the research literature suggests that accreditation likely has an isomorphic effect on school management practices (Coutet, 2022b). The isomorphic effect of schools undergoing accreditation, as described in the scientific literature, refers to the implementation of similar management practices to meet standards, which leads to greater uniformity in their operations.

International accreditation represents a rather intricate, resource-intensive, and time-consuming process. For example, if we consider the Council of International Schools (CIS), a world-leading accrediting body, the entire accreditation cycle for a school can take up to five years (CIS, 2024). The interaction between a school and CIS begins with obtaining membership in the organization, which takes at least six months. Membership serves as the basis for preparing for the so-called Preliminary Accreditation stage, which involves the school's reflective report on compliance with CIS standards across eight domains (commitment to guiding principles, leadership and governance, curriculum, assessment, student well-being, staff, safe infrastructure, partnerships), and a visit by a CIS team to assess readiness for the self-study stage. The self-study is the most complex and lengthy stage of the accreditation, during which the school conducts an extensive analysis across all developmental areas and submits it along with supporting evidence to CIS. Subsequently, CIS appoints another team to visit the school, after which a decision is made regarding the school's accreditation status. Typically, to ensure a systematic approach in preparation for accreditation, school leaders organize the school staff into working groups that focus on enhancing various aspects of school operations, gathering evidence of compliance with standards, and preparing reports. Under such circumstances, stakeholders may encounter additional workload burdens.

International accreditation is focused on implementing continuous improvements in school operations. A review of the CIS website (CIS, 2024) indicates that accrediting bodies

aim to observe the progression of enhancements made during the accreditation period. The CIS Accreditation Framework provides clear guidelines for schools regarding areas requiring enhancement. By gradually fulfilling these standards, schools can significantly improve their performance across all areas of operation.

### ***Problem Statement***

International accreditation has become a crucial tool for enhancing the quality of education and competitiveness for schools worldwide, including those in Kazakhstan. The accreditation process is highly demanding and necessitates the engagement of the entire school community - founders, leadership, staff, students, parents. As noted by Alshamsi et al. (2020), ineffective communication within the team poses a significant challenge in implementing large-scale projects such as international accreditation. Therefore, establishing effective communication among school stakeholders plays a pivotal role in ensuring the successful attainment of accreditation objectives.

Exploration of opinions and perceptions is a crucial aspect of communication (Zhao, Liu, & Xu, 2016). It enhances trust and transparency within the staff, consolidates efforts, and impacts efficiency. Moreover, it mitigates conflicts and dissatisfaction while fostering development and innovation. Therefore, it is deemed appropriate in this study to examine the perceptions of school stakeholders regarding international accreditation. As mentioned above, various school stakeholders hold distinct perceptions regarding the pursuit of international accreditation. The challenge lies in decisions to pursue international accreditation often being made without accounting for the opinions of all stakeholders. Misalignment of goals and expectations leads to a slowdown in progress and hindered achievement of outcomes, alongside diminished trust and decreased effectiveness.

Moreover, there are challenging factors in the process of accreditation. For example, the accreditation process can be a significant additional work burden for teachers, leading to

stress and burnout. Unaware of potential challenges for staff, school leaders do not adequately plan the accreditation process nor allocate appropriate resources.

Additionally, stakeholders perceive the accreditation process as excessively formal, where each stage is seen as an inspection rather than a systematic roadmap for incremental improvements in the school. With this approach, it is difficult to ensure the quality of the improvements being carried out, since all the actions of the school team are carried out just for show.

Therefore, it is particularly important, especially for school leaders, to know what challenges other stakeholders face, and to ensure a correct understanding of the process by the entire school community.

The relevance of studying the perceptions of school stakeholders regarding international accreditation is also underscored by the insufficient exploration of the topic in scholarly literature within the context of secondary schools in Kazakhstan. While extensive research has been devoted to the advantages and disadvantages of international accreditation in higher education and business schools, insufficient attention has been given to the emerging risks that accompany the accreditation process (Alshamsi et al., 2020b). The understanding among school stakeholders of accreditation as a process leading to continuous improvements is also under-researched.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

This qualitative research aims to explore school stakeholders' perceptions of international accreditation in a private school in Kazakhstan, focusing on their motivations for pursuing international accreditation, perceived drawbacks and benefits, challenges encountered during the process and views on accreditation as a mechanism for continuous school improvement.

### ***Research questions***

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are their perceptions of the main drivers for pursuing international accreditation?
2. What are their perceptions of the advantages and drawbacks of international accreditation?
3. What are the main challenges that school stakeholders faced during the international accreditation process?
4. What are school stakeholders' perceptions of the role of the process of international accreditation in schools' continuous improvements?

### ***Significances of the Study***

This study holds the potential to significantly contribute to scholarly knowledge in this field, particularly due to the under-researched nature of this topic within the context of secondary schools in Kazakhstan. It will offer fresh insights into the drivers motivating educational stakeholders in their pursuit of international accreditation. Specifically, this research, building upon findings from other studies, will help reaffirm what primarily motivates each stakeholder when seeking to be part of an internationally accredited school. Additionally, the study will help identify concealed potential drawbacks of international accreditation, once again reinforcing the theory that aligning schools to uniform standards inevitably leads to isomorphism and a reduction in creativity within pedagogical practices.

Examining the perceptions of school stakeholders regarding international accreditation also carries practical utility. Understanding differences in stakeholder motivations can assist school leaders in more effectively managing the accreditation process. Based on the study's findings, schools applying for accreditation can develop appropriate communication strategies to align goals and expectations within their collective. For instance, by comprehending the

primary concern of parents of students, leaders can emphasize the necessity of accreditation, thereby fostering a school community united in purpose. A clear understanding of each stakeholder's motivations can minimize potential conflicts and reduce resistance to change within the collective.

Furthermore, uncovering hidden potential drawbacks of international accreditation can prompt schools seeking accreditation to contemplate strategies for integrating international standards into their internal content without compromising individuality, innovation, and creativity. Understanding how school staff engaged in accreditation perceive it as a process of implementing sequential changes and improvements in various areas of school life can potentially aid in developing effective communication strategies. This study will provide practical recommendations to school leaders on the need for clarification among the collective about the true essence of the international accreditation process. Ultimately, this understanding will contribute to continuous improvement in the educational process.

This study will also identify the primary difficulties and challenges faced by school stakeholders during the accreditation process. This understanding can also have practical utility by helping decision-makers anticipate the capabilities of the collective, financial resources, and mechanisms to support staff during accreditation. The research findings could potentially serve as a starting point for further research in this area, particularly in areas such as decision-making mechanisms for applying for international accreditation or the long-term impact of accreditation on educational quality in accredited schools in Kazakhstan.

Thus, this study has the potential to complement scholarly research in this field, positively impact the effectiveness of schools undergoing international accreditation, and ultimately contribute to enhancing the quality of education.

### ***Personal Positioning as a Researcher***

As a researcher exploring school stakeholders' perceptions of international accreditation, I must acknowledge my professional background and current role at a private school, which shapes my perspective in this study.

It should be noted that consideration of perceptions from the point of view of communication effectiveness resonates with the specifics of my professional experience. For about seven years, I worked in the field of political PR and communications in the public service. This experience underlines the importance I place on communication in any organization, believing it to be critical for success. My professional background in communications and PR strengthens my belief that effective interactions within any community play a pivotal role in the educational process. However, this professional experience might lead me to have high expectations regarding the communication activities of school stakeholders, potentially introducing bias into my interpretation of the study results.

Additionally, my administrative position (deputy principal) may bias the interpretation of challenges teachers face during the international accreditation process. Another aspect that may influence my understanding of these challenges is my limited teaching experience. While studying the difficulties that teachers face during the accreditation process, I might overlook the specific demands of classroom teaching, which involves a significant workload. Furthermore, my current role as deputy principal responsible for the school's international accreditation could influence my interpretation of the advantages and disadvantages of international accreditation. Being an advocate for international accreditation due to my position, I might unintentionally emphasize its benefits over its drawbacks when considering this issue.

Moreover, my judgments regarding the motivations of stakeholders in seeking international accreditation might be influenced by my personal beliefs, particularly my bias

against business owners of private schools. I hold a latent belief that many private school owners are driven primarily by profit rather than genuine improvements in school operations.

This acknowledgment highlights that my background, current role, and personal beliefs could influence how I interpret research and collect data. Nonetheless, I am dedicated to ensuring that my personal experiences and biases do not sway the study's findings.

To minimize the influence of my professional experience and personal beliefs on the research results, I need to strictly follow the described methodologies and procedures, maintain mindfulness during interviews by avoiding leading respondents to desired answers, and apply a reflective approach when analyzing and describing the obtained data, constantly checking myself for bias.

### ***Outline of the Thesis***

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter One introduces the background, research problem, purpose, research questions, significance of the study, and the researcher's personal positioning. Chapter Two presents a literature review on international accreditation, covering its definitions, significance, stakeholder motivations, perceived benefits, drawbacks, challenges, and its role as a process of continuous improvement, with a focus on research gaps in the context of secondary schools in Kazakhstan. Chapter Three outlines the qualitative research methodology, including the research design, participant selection, data collection and analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and study limitations. Chapter Four presents the findings from stakeholder interviews, organized thematically according to the research questions. Chapter Five offers a discussion of these findings, interpreting their significance, relating them to the existing literature, and evaluating how well they address the research questions. Finally, Chapter Six concludes the thesis with a summary of key insights, discusses the practical implications, and provides recommendations for schools and suggestions for future research.

### ***Summary of the Chapter***

This chapter highlighted the growing significance of international accreditation as a tool for ensuring educational quality and enhancing the competitiveness of schools, both in the global context and within Kazakhstan. It also discussed the diverse motivations of stakeholders involved in this process. The research problem is focused on the role of effective communication among school community members during the accreditation process, as a lack of goal alignment may hinder the successful attainment of accreditation. The chapter formulated the purpose and research questions aimed at exploring stakeholder motivations, their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of accreditation, as well as their understanding of accreditation as a process of continuous improvement. Furthermore, the study seeks to address a gap in the scholarly literature regarding accreditation in the context of secondary schools in Kazakhstan.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

This literature review focuses on school stakeholders' perceptions of various aspects of international accreditation, aligned with the aim and research questions. I use a funnel approach, starting with broader concepts and gradually narrowing the scope to more specific categories closely related to the research. The depth of source coverage depends on each aspect's relevance to the research questions.

Key topics include the significance of international accreditation, motivations for pursuing it, stakeholders' perceptions of its value, potential drawbacks, challenges faced, and accreditation as a tool for continuous school improvement. The review begins with a definition of international accreditation and explore the factors driving schools towards it. It examines what stakeholders value most and include studies where the benefits of the accreditation are explicitly outlined. Additionally, the review discusses potential adverse effects, challenges, and how accreditation is perceived as a continuous improvement process.

### ***State of Knowledge of the Issue and Gaps in the Research***

In recent decades, international accreditation has become a focal point for researchers across diverse educational fields. While a significant portion of the existing scholarly literature focuses on higher education institutions such as universities and colleges, recent decades have witnessed a growing interest in examining international accreditation within the context of secondary schools. This reflects the broader expansion of accreditation practices beyond universities and into the school sector, as educational quality assurance has become increasingly relevant across different levels of education.

International accreditation has been extensively examined in academic literature from various perspectives and aspects. A substantial number of articles and studies have focused on the impact of international accreditation on the performance, culture, and quality of educational institutions or institutional changes (Hays, 2003; Hou, 2010; Fertig, 2015; Nguyen, 2017; Ulker

& Bakioglu, 2018; Istileulova, 2018; Ito et al., 2024). International accreditation is considered a means of quality assurance in Kazakhstan's higher education as well (Manarbek et al., 2018; Kerimkulova, 2020). Some research investigates the potential benefits of international accreditation (Istileulova, 2013; Adiatma et al., 2022b) and the challenges associated with it (Scherer et al., 2005; Steve, 2015; Alshamsi et al., 2020c). Most articles focus on international accreditation in business schools and healthcare institutions, likely due to their intense global competition. It is also noteworthy that some studies on international accreditation in business schools date back to the 1980s (Thanopoulos & Vernon, 1987). The academic literature explores various dimensions of how accreditation affects business schools, such as its impact on teaching quality, learning outcomes, and research (Ke et al., 2016; Lagrosen, 2017; Trifts, 2012); the administration of educational programs (Jantzen, 2000); competitive positioning (Zhao and Ferran, 2016); and faculty performance (Azad and Seyyed, 2007). Numerous studies have examined specific cases related to particular accrediting agencies in business education (Thanopoulos & Vernon, 1987; Urgel, 2007; MacKenzie et al., 2019).

Research on the international accreditation of secondary schools, while still developing, has begun to attract increasing scholarly attention. Primary sources include specialized education journals, books on global education, reviews detailing accreditation methodologies, accrediting agencies' websites (e.g., CIS, 2024), and media publications. Recent studies predominantly explore the impact of international accreditation on school operations, its potential long-term implications, and potential adverse effects associated with accreditation. As an example, Adiyaman and Özmantar (2023) in their study employing a multiple-case study design at three private primary schools in Turkey accredited with the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (IB-PYP), investigated its effects on school dynamics, focusing on inputs, processes, outputs, feedback mechanisms, and the environment. Key findings indicate predominantly positive impacts: increased teacher job satisfaction,

enhanced student social development, and improved learning outcomes and student products. Challenges were noted, particularly in aligning the IB-PYP curriculum with national standards, especially in higher grade levels, and balancing its objectives with the demands of high-stakes national exams. Successful implementation hinged on factors such as the school community's attitude towards accreditation, staff professional competence, and the school's strategic sustainability assessment, cost-effectiveness, and readiness.

This growing body of research reflects the increasing importance of international accreditation in the school sector, though further studies remain necessary to deepen the understanding of stakeholders' perceptions and experiences.

### ***Limitations in Literature Search***

In the literature search for this study, for comprehensive coverage, distinctions between international and national (or state) accreditation were sometimes not strictly delineated. National accreditation, as known, is conducted by local educational authorities and confirms a school's compliance with national academic standards. In contrast, international accreditation entails meeting standards set by independent international agencies or associations. Scholarly literature also mentions such differentiation (Ibrahim, 2014). Nevertheless, both national and international accreditation forms aim to assess educational institutions against rigorous standards. Both accreditations entail certain benefits, advantages, and challenges for stakeholders. In this regard, certain aspects of this study draw on cases within the framework of national accreditation in various countries. For instance, in their research, Khurram et al. (2020) examined teachers' perceptions at a state university in Pakistan undergoing national accreditation. One of the study's findings was that teachers had a limited understanding of the accreditation process.

The literature search also saw limited use of the term "international school," as this definition encompasses a broader concept than "international accreditation." International

schools adopt curricula from programs and organizations such as the International Baccalaureate, Edexcel, Cambridge Assessment International Education, International Primary Curriculum, or Advanced Placement. However, these programs primarily serve as global providers of educational frameworks rather than institutional bodies setting comprehensive standards across all facets of school operations.

### ***Definition and Importance of International Accreditation***

Accreditation or an international accreditation of educational institutions is generally defined as the process whereby an educational institution or program undergoes evaluation and receives formal recognition for meeting specific predetermined standards of quality. For example, Ibrahim (2014) in his study asserts that in education, accreditation involves an association or agency evaluating an educational institution or program of study, formally acknowledging it as having fulfilled or surpassed specific predetermined requirements, criteria, or standards of educational excellence. According to Istileulova (2013), international accreditation encompasses evaluating educational institutions against globally recognized standards to ensure quality and foster continuous improvement. The process typically includes comprehensive assessments of the institution's programs, faculty qualifications, student services, and administrative practices, aiming to affirm the institution's dedication to upholding high educational standards.

It is important to note that elements such as the evaluation process and adherence to standards are pivotal in the literature in defining the term accreditation within the context of educational institutions. The distinction lies in that for national accreditation, the accrediting body is typically a local government agency, whereas for international accreditation, it is generally an independent international accrediting agency. Indeed, if we examine the accreditation approaches of the most widely recognized accrediting organizations such as CIS

(2024), they all conduct evaluations of schools to assess compliance with a set of specific standards established by the accrediting organization itself.

As has been repeatedly noted, international accreditation serves to enhance the quality of education and bolster its competitiveness both locally and globally. The literature also underscores the significance of international accreditation and its undeniable benefits for educational institutions. In his study, Ibrahim (2014), discussing the importance of quality assurance in education, stressed, that it is «in most cases encouraged by seeking of some form of internal or external validation, or accreditation». The author describes the importance of accreditation in several ways. As noted, accreditation can ensure public confidence and accountability in an educational institution. It also guarantees the quality of an institution through the application of standards and rigorous evaluation criteria. Additionally, accreditation facilitates the reciprocity of recognition of qualifications and the mobility of academic personnel. For students, accreditation aids in the transfer of credits between institutions and admission to advanced degree programs. For professionals, an accredited qualification is essential for their practice and can enhance employment opportunities. Accreditation also assists institutions in marketing their success and recruiting students and staff.

In another article, Adiatma et al. (2022c) extensively discuss various aspects highlighting the importance of international accreditation for higher education institutions, emphasizing the significance of global recognition among universities worldwide. Authors state that it provides institutions and their study programs with international recognition and a mark of quality, motivating them to cultivate a culture of continuous improvement. Accreditation, as discussed by the authors, helps maintain institutional competitiveness in a globalized world and is viewed as an investment in quality and organizational health. Furthermore, they emphasize that it is essential for institutions aiming to become globally

renowned universities. According to Adiatma et al. (2022c), accreditation also boosts the competitiveness of graduates in the international labor market and serves as a benchmark for organizational health and accountability to stakeholders.

In another study, the author examines international accreditation in universities as a process that influences profound transformation and institutional changes (Istieulova, 2013). The author also views international accreditation as a versatile mechanism that boosts the reputation and competitiveness of universities by showcasing their compliance with global quality standards. It plays a crucial role in attracting international students and faculty, securing funding and partnerships, and supporting the internationalization of higher education through a framework that aligns with global benchmarks. Moreover, international accreditation enhances the quality and recognition of university programs via external evaluation and validation, and promotes student and faculty mobility alongside the transferability of qualifications internationally.

The importance of international accreditation is also highlighted in studies focusing on international schools. Hayden and Thompson (2008b) provide a comprehensive review of the evolution, current status, and future prospects of international schools. Discussing the significance of international accreditation, the authors note that it facilitates the internationalization of higher education by promoting the mobility of students and faculty, as well as the transferability of qualifications across borders. As Ismail (2023) emphasizes, accreditation can also enable an educational institution to form partnerships with other accredited institutions, facilitating exchange programs, joint research initiatives, and various collaborative activities. Additionally, it can provide graduates with a competitive edge in the job market, enhancing their career prospects and increasing their likelihood of success.

Analyzing the reviewed literature, it can be concluded that international accreditation represents a complex process that stimulates the quality of education. As researchers note,

accreditation also helps to enhance the reputation of a university or school, enabling it to remain competitive in the education market. However, the genuine motivations and drivers for stakeholders in obtaining international accreditation may not always align with the apparent benefits of accreditation. As noted in the introduction, stakeholder motivation can largely depend on the context. In this regard, it is useful to analyze how this aspect is considered in scientific research and other sources.

### ***Motivations and Drivers for Stakeholders to Pursue International Accreditation***

Pursuing international accreditation by educational stakeholders is a multifaceted process driven by diverse motivations and objectives. This section of literature review seeks to compile and analyze current research to explore the reasons stakeholders strive for international accreditation, emphasizing the benefits, and primary and intrinsic goals tied to this endeavor.

As various sources have noted, the latter half of the 20th century saw a significant increase in the number of international schools worldwide. Hayden and Thompson (2008c) highlight in their comprehensive work on the evolution of international schools that this growth was primarily driven by the pragmatic necessity to support expatriate communities. The authors note that such schools were established to meet the educational needs of the children of diplomats, employees of multinational corporations, and other professionals living abroad. These families required educational programs that were recognized and acceptable for children moving between countries (Hayden & Thompson, 2008b). International schools could meet these needs by offering curricula from their home countries. Notably, originally established to cater to expatriates residing in the host country, international schools became increasingly popular among local students whose parents were dissatisfied with the quality of local education and were looking for opportunities for their children to enroll in foreign universities (Hayden and Thompson, 2013). Thus, according to the authors, in addition to pragmatic needs, school stakeholders were also driven by ideological aspirations. International schools offered

values of global citizenship and responsibility, environmental awareness, and social justice. With the acceleration of globalization, these values resonated with parents and their children. Moreover, such components of international education, according to the authors, could provide their children with competitive advantages in the global job market. With the increase in the number of such schools, there was a need to ensure quality and adherence to educational standards. This led to the creation of various accreditation bodies and frameworks aimed at maintaining high standards and fostering continuous improvement in educational practices. In support of this thought, the study by Alfaraidy (2020) can be cited, which highlighted that, in his research on Saudi parents, the quality of the school, including accreditation as a component, was identified as one of the most compelling factors influencing the choice of an international school.

Based on the authors' work, it can be seen that historically, the motivations of student families for enrolling in international schools were rooted in practical needs. It is essential to note that despite the evolution of views, values, and perceptions, these same aspirations continue to underpin parents' decisions to send their children to international schools today. Globalization is gaining momentum, and with it, the global integration of the labor market is occurring. This trend inevitably influences the increasing number of expatriate children in international schools, including in Kazakhstan. In recent years, there has been a sharp rise in the number of children relocating from Russia to schools in Astana and Almaty. This is evidently connected to geopolitical conflict. In my opinion, a key factor for modern local parents in their desire to enroll their children in international schools is the quality of education that meets international standards. These parents are also motivated by the desire for their children to possess a global outlook and intercultural competence, and to be educated in English. Furthermore, attending internationally accredited schools enhances the chances of admission to foreign universities.

Another study also considers from a historical perspective the motivations of stakeholders to pursue international education and accreditation during the first era of globalization (Hayden et al., 2002). As authors describe, during this period, there was a growing awareness of the need to transcend national barriers through educational understanding, driven by "French philosophes, German and English internationalists of the Enlightenment". However, this was often overshadowed by the rise of nationalism and the view that education should serve as an instrument of national policy rather than international understanding. Despite this tension, there were notable attempts to establish international schools during this time, such as the Spring Grove School in England in the 1860s. The authors emphasize that these efforts were motivated by a desire to promote international harmony, linguistic fluency, and an international outlook among students. As indicated, forward-looking educators and scientists saw international education as a way to counter the perceived deficiencies of the existing national education systems. Besides that, this work highlights the mercenary motives of some students, who protested against school rules in pursuit of "Our Half-Holiday! No Uniform Caps! Unlimited Tobacco!". This suggests that even in this early period, there were pragmatic concerns alongside ideological goals. Overall, as authors emphasize, the historical perspective reveals that the motivations for international education and accreditation were a mix of idealism, nationalism, and pragmatism, reflecting the tensions of the first era of globalization.

It is important to note that the advantage of international schools highlighted in the work of Hayden et al. (2002), which is associated with the ability to deviate from the national educational program, is presumably one of the main motivators for school stakeholders even today.

The literature also describes cases where multiple stakeholders—government, international schools, and international accrediting organizations—were interested in

implementing an international accreditation system. Jingqi and Ulmet (2019) link the emergence of the international accreditation system to the increased number of international schools. As the authors emphasize, the international schools in China wanted the government to help resolve the difficulties and problems they were experiencing during their development. They hoped the government could provide better management and oversight of international schools. The Ministry of Education of China aimed to innovate management mechanisms to enhance the oversight of international schools in China, viewing international accreditation as a means to achieve this. To this end, the Ministry proposed creating a unified school accreditation system in collaboration with the most renowned accrediting agencies. In turn, "organizations like CIS, NEASC, and WASC were interested in expanding their accreditation services" (Jingqi & Ulmet, 2019).

Recent research has highlighted a range of factors motivating stakeholders in educational institutions to seek international accreditation in the current context. Overall, stakeholders view international accreditation as a tool for improving quality, enhancing reputation, and gaining a competitive edge in the global education market.

For example, in his work, Bryant (2013) provides insights into the motivations of different business school stakeholders, highlighting the impact of accreditation on governance, strategic management, and educational quality. The author notes that, first and foremost, school administrators utilize accreditation to enhance their institution's brand image as a marker of quality, which is particularly crucial for attracting international students in competitive markets. Additionally, Bryant points out that international accreditation is perceived as a means to secure additional funding. Another driver identified by the author is the opportunity for autonomy from restrictive systems that accreditation can provide. According to Bryant, faculty members are motivated by international accreditation because it establishes clear standards for research output, teaching quality, and professional development. Furthermore, students are

recognized as a key stakeholder group that benefits from the enhanced educational quality of accreditation.

The article by Istileulova (2013) describes drivers for stakeholders similar to those mentioned in the above-referenced work. The author discusses various stakeholders' motivations for pursuing international accreditation for business schools. In these institutions, school administrators see accreditation as a strategy to enhance the school's reputation and attract more students. Faculty members are motivated by the opportunities for improved research output and professional development. Students view accreditation as a means to access better employment opportunities and gain recognition for their international degrees. Istileulova also highlights the role of government, which is primarily interested in ensuring quality assurance and promoting the country's educational system globally.

As the scientific literature describes, one of the primary drivers for educational leaders is the enhanced status and prestige that comes with accreditation (Hail, Hurst, Chang, & Cooper, 2019). The study revealed that 77% of faculty believe that accreditation enhances the university's status. This status is also viewed as a means to attract high-quality students and faculty, which can, in turn, open up more opportunities for federal funding and grants. Additionally, the article notes that faculty members see accreditation as ensuring their programs meet rigorous professional standards, thereby improving overall educational quality. However, the article also highlights that many students may not fully understand the significance of accreditation or how it benefits them directly, indicating a need for better communication regarding the value of accreditation to students. This statement underscores the importance of communication as a lens through which the accreditation process is examined in my research.

In their research, Scherer et al. (2005) consider that educational leaders, such as deans or administrators, are primarily motivated by the strategic value of international accreditation.

The authors emphasize that international accreditation in Europe is viewed as a marketing tool to attract students from the US and other parts of the world. Moreover, European business schools require accreditation to develop and sustain strategic global partnerships and academic exchange programs.

Fertig (2007) in his article also examines the factors driving the increasing interest in accreditation, such as market demands and the need for public acknowledgment of quality. The author notes that in a highly competitive educational market, the primary goal for schools is to attract and retain students' parents, which can be achieved by displaying a mark of "quality" provided by school accreditation.

As indicated by the reviewed studies, the key drivers for educational stakeholders in pursuing international accreditation are the enhancement of educational quality and reputation, as well as ensuring competitiveness on a global level, which reflects a shared goal among stakeholders to strengthen the position of educational institutions in the international educational arena.

An analysis of the literature on the drivers for obtaining international accreditation indicates that the motivation of educational stakeholders is multifaceted and determined by both pragmatic and ideological factors. As evidenced by the literature, historically the primary drivers have been tangible needs—supporting expatriate communities, ensuring academic mobility, and meeting parents' demand for an education that conforms to international standards. On the other hand, ideological aspects, such as fostering values of global citizenship and the pursuit of innovation, also play a significant role.

### ***Drawbacks of International Accreditation and Challenges of the Process of International Accreditation***

Although international accreditation offers numerous advantages and benefits, it has also faced criticism in the academic literature.

For instance, Rickett (1992) argues that the drawbacks, such as the expense of maintaining a bureaucratic system and the potential threat to academic freedom posed by external evaluation, outweigh the potential benefits of external validation. Similar ideas are expressed by several other authors as well. As Harvey (2004) points out, accreditation can limit academic freedom, hinder adaptation and innovation, and lead to increased bureaucratization and oversight. Sziegat (2021) also stresses in his study that “the adaptation of criteria and standards of accreditation is a time-consuming process”.

Interviews conducted within the framework of scientific research with various educational stakeholders regarding the drawbacks of accreditation share opinions that accreditation can impose significant burdens, including inefficiency, time-intensive procedures, substantial personal costs, accreditation fees, limited resources, lengthy processes, bureaucratic overload, and excessive regulation. For example, in her study, Istileulova (2013) examined stakeholders' perceptions of the shortcomings of international accreditation. The results revealed that respondents believe the accreditation process is highly time-consuming and demands significant investment. The study also noted that the preparation phase hinders the progress of other school objectives.

In their study, Wilson-Hail et al. (2019) conducted a survey to explore faculty perceptions of accreditation, particularly focusing on its drawbacks. Respondents indicated that accreditation places considerable strain on faculty due to increased workload and stress. They also highlighted the significant financial costs and resource requirements associated with the process.

The theory of institutional isomorphism, frequently mentioned in the literature regarding international accreditation, is also of interest. The phenomenon of isomorphism was thoroughly described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) as the process by which organizations increasingly resemble one another as they become organized into a field. In turn, Coutet (2022),

in his comprehensive study, examines the extent to which accreditation contributes to this phenomenon. By analyzing the handbook, standards, and lesson observation tool of a major global accreditor, this paper paints a picture of the 'ideal school' that would perform well in an accreditation review. Accreditation was found to constrain school management, narrow the school's educational philosophy, and dictate classroom practices. Limited opportunities for creativity were observed in teachers' design of learning activities, with the caveat that these activities must align with prescribed curriculum standards.

Indeed, according to the procedures of major international accrediting agencies, international accreditation involves the evaluation of schools to ensure they meet specific standards. According to several authors, excessive standardization can lead to a loss of flexibility within schools. For instance, Fertig (2007) notes that the increasing use of generic indicators has the potential to create international schools that are less diverse and more homogenous. The author emphasizes the challenge schools encounter in balancing their unique missions with the demands of meeting standardized criteria. Perryman et al. (2017) supports this view, noting that the values embedded in accrediting standards shape what schools prioritize when developing their policies and other guiding documents. Bryant (2013) also emphasizes that schools and accreditation agencies need to ensure that standards do not result in "standardization."

Another drawback of international accreditation, as noted in various sources, pertains to its procedure, specifically the stage of school self-assessment and the submission of evidence demonstrating compliance with standards. According to some researchers, the effectiveness of providing evidence is not always guaranteed, as it can be associated with potential data fabrication by schools. As Coutet (2022, p. 108) points out, "the validity of self-evaluation may be called into question". Ball (2003) also mentioned the possibility of data fabrication during accreditation, which can have extremely negative consequences for the organization.

Furthermore, according to the authors, the risk of submitting fabricated data increases, when a school is under pressure due to the potential failure of accreditation (Coutet, 2022).

The analysis of the reviewed literature highlights the potential drawbacks of international accreditation as perceived by various authors. These scholars argue that the bureaucratic demands imposed by accrediting agencies can hinder innovation, limit academic freedom, and lead to excessive standardization of educational practices. However, it is important to note that these assertions are not always accurate. For instance, if we consider the approach adopted by one of the most prominent accrediting organizations globally, the Council of International Schools (CIS, 2024), one of the key principles applied to accredited schools is neutrality. In this context, neutrality refers to the Council of International Schools' stance on a school's guiding principles, curriculum, policy, definitions of high-quality education, or global citizenship. The standards, in this case, serve as a foundation, a framework for schools to implement continuous improvements.

The literature review reveals that educational stakeholders encounter considerable challenges throughout the accreditation process. It should be noted that the majority of authors use the terms "drawbacks" and "challenges" interchangeably when referring to accreditation, implying the same concepts. While many potential difficulties of the accreditation process have been discussed above, this section of the review will focus on some articles that provide specific examples of the challenges stakeholders encounter during the accreditation process.

It is important to note that, according to stakeholders' perceptions, described in literature, the major challenges associated with the accreditation process include significant time commitment, balancing regular duties with accreditation requirements, extensive paperwork, and a lack of resources.

In the study conducted by Wilson-Hail et al. (2019), faculty members described the accreditation process as both time-consuming and labor-intensive. Respondents indicated that

the process distracts from their primary responsibilities, such as research, teaching, and other core duties. Additionally, many faculty members reported that the process is overly complex. The study of Gaharan et al. (2007) revealed similar findings, pointing out that faculty members describe the accreditation process as demanding significant time and effort. Besides, because of an increased involvement in the process, faculty received limited benefits regarding reduced teaching loads.

Given that the research problem is examined through the lens of communications within the school community, an effort was made during the literature review to identify the perspectives of educational stakeholders that highlight the challenges they face in understanding the accreditation process. Indeed, several studies have shown that stakeholders, including school or university staff undergoing accreditation, have expressed concerns about a low level of awareness regarding the accreditation process (Attree & Neher, 2023; Khurram et al., 2020).

### ***International Accreditation as a Process of Continuous Improvements***

A review of the websites of major accrediting organizations consistently emphasizes that accreditation not only validates a school's current compliance with quality standards but also demonstrates its commitment to ongoing improvement (CIS, 2024). If we explore the CIS approach to accredited schools, one of the key aspects is that, during the five-year accreditation cycle, the school must demonstrate consistent and continuous improvements in its main areas of activity. The standards serve as a tool for the school, providing an action plan for improving performance across various domains.

Given the research problem and questions, the literature review aimed to explore the extent to which school stakeholders understand and utilize the process of international accreditation as an opportunity to bring improvements to the school's operations.

Among the reviewed sources, no studies were found with a similar research question. It is important to note that most sources consider improvements resulting from international accreditation in the long-term perspective. However, some studies mention that the accreditation process itself can also help schools implement changes immediately. According to Mo and Ulmet (2019), international accreditation is widely acknowledged as a mechanism for supporting school improvement. Meuret and Morlaix (2003) described the self-assessment stage of the accreditation process, during which the school evaluates its strengths and weaknesses, as a crucial step in implementing improvements.

### ***Summary***

This chapter provided a review of scholarly literature addressing various aspects of how school stakeholders perceive international accreditation. The analysis of the reviewed sources demonstrated that while a significant body of research historically focuses on accreditation in higher education, there is a growing trend of scholarly interest in the accreditation of secondary schools. This reflects the expansion of quality assurance practices across educational levels. Given the similarities in the nature and purpose of international accreditation across different contexts, the review incorporated studies from higher education alongside research on schools.

The review covered key aspects such as stakeholders' motivations for pursuing accreditation, perceived benefits, drawbacks, challenges faced during the accreditation process, and accreditation as a tool for continuous school improvement. Although certain areas, such as the perception of accreditation as a continuous improvement process or the role of communication within school communities, have received limited attention, this highlights opportunities for further exploration. This literature review confirms the relevance of the chosen research topic and positions the current study as a contribution to the expanding discourse on international accreditation in schools.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This chapter presents the research methodology employed to explore the perceptions of school stakeholders regarding international accreditation in a private school located in Astana, Kazakhstan. The study seeks to understand stakeholders' motivations for pursuing accreditation, the perceived benefits and challenges of the process, and their perspectives on accreditation as a pathway to continuous school improvement. To address these research aims, this chapter details the philosophical underpinnings of the study, outlines the qualitative research design, and describes the rationale for the chosen approach.

The chapter begins by presenting the research paradigm, emphasizing the interpretivist stance that underpins the study's aim to capture and interpret the lived experiences and subjective understandings of participants. Following this, the research design is discussed, including the case study strategy adopted to provide an in-depth, contextualized exploration of a single private school. The selection criteria for the research site and participants are then explained, with purposive sampling used to identify individuals in key stakeholder roles who are directly involved in or impacted by the accreditation process.

The chapter then outlines the methods of data collection, which include semi-structured interviews as the primary tool for gathering rich, descriptive data. The justification for using this method is provided, alongside details about the design of the interview protocol, the procedures for conducting interviews, and the approach to transcription. Data analysis procedures are also described, including the use of thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and variations in the participants' accounts.

Ethical considerations are given significant attention, including issues of informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data protection.

### ***Research Design***

This research explores school stakeholders' perceptions of international accreditation concerning their motivations for pursuing it, the drawbacks, the challenges encountered during the accreditation process, and the consideration of the accreditation process as a means of continuous school improvement. The research study is grounded in the interpretivism paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and shaped by individual experiences and contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm is well-suited for understanding the diverse perceptions of school stakeholders regarding international accreditation.

A qualitative approach was used to fulfill the study's purpose and address the research questions. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research emphasizes analyzing and interpreting a particular phenomenon. This approach helped facilitating a deep understanding of the perceptions of school stakeholders towards international accreditation. Moreover, the qualitative design allows for an in-depth analysis of motivations, challenges, and perceptions related to international accreditation, aligning with the study's goal of understanding these complex, context-driven views (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### ***Research Site***

For this study, one of the private schools, located in Astana (Kazakhstan), was selected. Being a member of the Council of International Schools (CIS), this school has already started the international accreditation process. Such a site was chosen because it provides a relevant context for studying school stakeholders' perceptions of international accreditation.

The school was established four years ago and operates under popular Kazakhstani educational brand. The owners are a group of entrepreneurs with business interests across various sectors. The research site is a full-day school offering education across both primary and secondary grades. Currently, the school enrolls approximately 550 students and employs around 100 staff members, including administration, teachers, and support personnel. One of

the key factors attracting parents is the opportunity for students to pass internationally recognized examinations.

### ***Sample Selection***

Since the study aims to comprehensively explore the perceptions of school stakeholders regarding international accreditation, it was essential to include all main stakeholders involved in the educational process and the accreditation process within the context of each school. The stakeholders involved in the research were school owners, principals, administrators, teachers, and parents of students (see Appendix E). Children were not included as participants due to their limited involvement and understanding of the accreditation process.

To collect data for this study, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants with direct experience in the international accreditation process. This method ensures the inclusion of individuals capable of providing rich, relevant, and diverse perspectives on the research questions. Purposive sampling is instrumental in qualitative research when the objective is to obtain a deep understanding from individuals with the most expertise. As Babbie (2014) highlights, this method enables researchers to deliberately choose participants who can provide the most meaningful insights. The study included nine participants: one owner, one principal, one school administrator, three teachers, and three parents of students from this school.

The participants from the administrative and teaching staff were those directly involved or previously engaged in the accreditation process, such as working group members. School leaders and owners were selected based on their involvement in decision-making processes regarding the accreditation of their educational institutions. However, it was challenging to apply a specific sampling strategy for parents of students, as this group is the least involved in the educational process.

It is also important to note that differentiated sampling of respondents was used depending on the specific question about stakeholders' perceptions. For example, to study perceptions regarding the motivations, advantages, or disadvantages of accreditation, it was necessary to gather opinions from all stakeholders involved. However, to understand the challenges and perceptions of the accreditation process, the researcher needed to obtain views from stakeholders directly involved in the process – a principal, an administrative worker, and teachers.

Recruitment began by contacting the school principal to explain the purpose of the study and requesting permission to conduct the research. The researcher shared a formal letter with the principal, which included all the details of my research, including the purpose and nature of the study. It included details such as who would participate in my research and what the participants would be asked to do. After gaining permission, the researcher started recruiting the participants. The researcher shared an informed consent letter with the principal and requested his participation in my study. Then, the researcher met with the potential participants – the school owner, administrative worker, and teachers to discuss their possible participation. After that, he shared informed consent letters with them. He also drew the potential respondents' attention to the fact that the emails contained ethical aspects of conducting the study. Ethical aspects of informing participants are covered extensively in the literature. For example, Kapp (2006) repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of risk management in research. It is also important to note that the researcher applied a differentiated approach in selecting teachers and reaching out to educators from different levels of education. He asked the principal for the parents' contacts to find volunteers among them. He reached out to them through communication channels with a request to consider participating in the research.

| Category             | Number of Participants |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| School Owner         | 1                      |
| School Principal     | 1                      |
| School administrator | 1                      |
| School teachers      | 3                      |
| Parents              | 3                      |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>9</b>               |

### ***Participant Background***

Below is a brief overview of the stakeholders who participated in the study.

*Bolat* the school co-owner, holds a master's degree from a prestigious university in the United States. After graduating in 2015, he joined his family's expanding private education business. Since then, he has worked in a network of private schools, holding various leadership and administrative positions. He is well-acquainted with the educational context, having overseen areas such as strategic development and financial planning in the school under study. About a year ago, Kyle stepped away from daily operations but continues to serve as a co-owner.

*Dauren*, the school principal, is an experienced educator and school leader with over 15 years of experience in education. He holds a master's degree in Educational Leadership from a UK university. He began his career in 2014 as a teacher in a leading Kazakh network of schools for gifted children. Later, as a senior leader, he coordinated the CIS accreditation process for several schools within the network. Dauren continued his career in a large international school network abroad, where he initiated and led the CIS accreditation process. As the head of the international accreditation department, he trained staff, conducted internal audits, and standardized key areas such as curriculum, assessment, student safety, and inclusive

education. He is also a certified CIS evaluator. His expertise combines both strategic leadership and deep knowledge of international standards.

*Elena*, a school administrator, began her career in 2003 as a finance lecturer at a state university. She later worked in the banking sector. Since 2022, she has been employed at the school under study as a parent liaison and admissions coordinator. Although she had no previous experience with accreditation processes, she is now actively involved as a member of the CIS working group.

*Aizhan*, an English teacher, has over 10 years of teaching experience, including work in IB programs at international schools in Kazakhstan. She spent five years teaching in the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools system. Currently, she teaches primary students but has also worked in middle and high school levels. Aizhan has been involved in CIS accreditation processes in previous schools and is now part of the working group for the “Quality of Learning” domain at her current school.

*Dmitry* is a teacher with nearly 30 years of experience in education. He has worked in public schools and gymnasiums and spent the last 10 years at an IB-accredited Nazarbayev Intellectual School. There, he served in various roles, including Theory of Knowledge (TOK) coordinator. He has participated in two CIS accreditation processes and three IB program evaluations. He was responsible for developing curricula, school policies (e.g., academic honesty), and elements of global citizenship and international mindedness. His master's thesis focused on the concept of international mindedness, closely linked to global citizenship. At his current school, Dmitry is part of the working group for the “Global Citizenship” domain.

*Ramina*, a primary school teacher, has over four years of teaching experience. She began her career in a public gymnasium before moving to the private school sector. Since 2022, she has been working at the school under study and is a member of the “Global Citizenship” working group.

*Aigul* is the parent of two students in grades 6 and 7 who have been attending the school for the past two years. She shared that the family's decision was motivated by the desire to give their children access to international education starting from middle school.

*Zhanar* is the parent of a 10th-grade student who has been enrolled at the school for one and a half years. The school's commitment to international standards and its status as a Cambridge International School were key factors in their decision. Zhanar works in the HR field and leads a major company.

*Yerzhan* is the parent of a middle school student who transferred from a public school. He is a co-founder of one of the largest and most reputable chess schools in Kazakhstan. He first encountered the school through a chess tournament and noted that the school made a strong impression on him even before his child was enrolled, which became a decisive factor in his school choice.

### ***Data Collection Method***

The method for data collection and understanding the studied phenomenon in this research was interviews. The popularity of interviews for collecting such qualitative data is supported by various authors who study interviewing methods. According to Berg and Lune (2012), interviews are an effective method for gaining an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions and discovering how they attach specific meanings to phenomena or events. Researchers also note that, depending on the research topic, interviews can sometimes be the only viable method of data collection (Sagintayeva et al., 2022). Specifically, as stated by the authors of the monograph, this method is essential when researchers seek to uncover the views of different categories of participants on a particular phenomenon or experience within their social or professional roles.

It is also essential to make every effort to conduct all interviews in a face-to-face format, as this approach offers several undeniable advantages over online formats—depth and

naturalness of interaction, avoidance of technical issues, a trusting atmosphere, fewer distractions, and the ability to observe non-verbal signals. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) noted that a face-to-face meeting is the most common form of interview, where one person gathers information from another.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants.

During individual interviews with school stakeholders, the researcher posed open-ended questions to explore stakeholders' perceptions of various aspects of accreditation. Before the interviews, the researcher critically reviewed the draft questions to identify and eliminate overly complex, leading, or closed questions. The interviews included different types of questions, such as experience and behavior, opinion and value, knowledge, attitude, and background questions (Patton, 2015). The questions were organized in a 'funnel' format, starting from general questions and moving towards more specific ones. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher introduced a warm-up topic unrelated to the research to help ease any potential tension among respondents.

For example, the interview with the school's teachers employed open-ended questions aimed at uncovering the educators' personal and professional experiences and perceptions of international accreditation. The participants were asked to define international accreditation and describe in detail their level of involvement in the current school and through examples from previous workplaces. The questions allowed for assessing the subjective motivational factors that drive staff when choosing to work in an internationally accredited school and to identify the main goals, issues, and challenges that schools face during the accreditation process. This approach provided the researcher with a comprehensive understanding of stakeholders' perceptions of international accreditation, facilitating a multifaceted analysis of the phenomenon.

All the interviews were conducted in Kazakh and Russian languages. The content of the interviews was recorded on the researcher's audio device and then transcribed and translated into English. Data collection started in November 2024 and ended in January 2025.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis process involved several sequential steps: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme review, drawing parallels between themes, and segmenting into distinct blocks according to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the first stage, the researcher familiarizes with the content of the interview transcripts to immerse in the data and begin forming a general understanding of the collected information. Then, the researcher decoded interesting data across the entire data set, creating initial codes that reflect important aspects of the research. Next, the codes were combined into potential themes, and all relevant data was gathered for each theme. The researcher then conducted a theme review, checking and refining the themes to ensure they accurately reflect the data. During this step, the researcher verified how well the themes corresponded to the coded excerpts and the entire data set, making adjustments as necessary. The subsequent step involved defining and naming the themes. Each theme was clearly described and given a name reflecting its essence and relevance to the research questions. This step was crucial to ensure that the themes were well-formulated and easily understood. In the final stage, these themes became the foundation for the findings chapter, where the researcher presented the results aligned with the research questions. Direct quotes from participants were included to substantiate the findings and illustrate the depth and richness of the data. This thematic analysis allowed for a systematic and thorough examination of school stakeholders' perceptions of international accreditation, identified key aspects and presented the results clearly and convincingly. This approach is based on the thematic analysis method described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

### ***Limitations***

The study has several limitations.

No research is immune to the subjectivity of participants' views or their unwillingness to openly express their opinions. Personal beliefs, perceptions, and reluctance to share genuine intentions can affect the reliability of the information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). For instance, not every teacher or staff member might want to sincerely share information about the challenges in their daily work process. Likewise, the willingness of school owners to disclose their true motivations regarding international accreditation can be questioned. When answering such questions, school owners might resort to standard responses about the necessity of contributing to educational development and similar reasons. To address these potential limitations, the researcher ensured confidentiality and anonymity, created a trusting interview environment, and employed open-ended, non-leading questions to encourage participants to express their genuine perspectives.

The Chapter Introduction contains the researcher's personal positioning, which could also influence the interpretation of data.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The researcher in this study took necessary precautions in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Nazarbayev University to minimize potential risks for both the research site and study participants. The primary ethical principles adhered to included voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity, obtaining informed consent, and minimizing any potential harm (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

All participants were informed that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. Informed consent forms were provided and signed by each participant to confirm their understanding and agreement to take part in the study (see Appendix B). These forms outlined

the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, potential risks and benefits, and participants' rights.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by ensuring that no identifying information about the school or participants—such as names, surnames, positions, or ages—was disclosed in any part of the research. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their identities, and the school's name was replaced with a generic label, such as "School," in all documentation and reporting.

Furthermore, the researcher ensured that all collected materials, including audio recordings and transcripts, were securely stored on a personal, password-protected computer, with access limited to the researcher and the academic supervisor. In compliance with ethical standards, the data obtained during the interviews will be deleted three years after the completion of the study (Patton, 2015).

### ***Summary***

This chapter describes the research methodology for studying school stakeholders' perceptions of international accreditation. The research is based on a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from key stakeholder groups, including school owners, leadership, teachers, and parents. By adhering to ethical guidelines and implementing strategies to ensure trustworthiness and reliability—such as purposive sampling, thematic analysis, and member-checking—the study aims to provide valuable insights that can support schools in enhancing the effectiveness of the international accreditation process. These methodological choices ensure that the research captures a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of stakeholder perceptions within the specific context of a private school in Kazakhstan.



## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### ***Introduction***

This chapter presents the findings of the study, summarizing stakeholders' responses from a private school in Kazakhstan regarding their perceptions of international accreditation.

This chapter presents the findings of the study, based on the perspectives of stakeholders from a private school in Kazakhstan regarding international accreditation. The findings are organized thematically in alignment with the research questions. The chapter begins by examining stakeholders' understandings of "international accreditation." It then outlines the primary motivations for pursuing accreditation, as well as the perceived benefits associated with the process. The chapter also addresses the challenges and obstacles encountered by schools during the accreditation process. Furthermore, it explores stakeholders' perceptions of accreditation as a mechanism for the continuous improvement of internal school processes. Attention is also given to stakeholders' views and recommendations concerning communication within the school community. Each section identifies key trends and recurring patterns, supported by illustrative quotations from participants. These findings provide the empirical foundation for the subsequent analysis in the Discussion chapter.

### ***Understanding of "International Accreditation"***

An analysis of the participants' answers to the question of how they understand "international accreditation" revealed a wide range of interpretations. Participants provided definitions that varied in detail and content.

At the same time, certain patterns could be traced in the responses that were characteristic of particular stakeholder groups. The interviews showed that the understanding of accreditation varied depending on the respondent's role in the educational process.

Stakeholders directly involved in education offered more detailed definitions, which were closer to the generally accepted professional understanding. For instance, teacher Aizhan,

who had already worked with accreditation within the NIS system, described it as *“a process of evaluating the school in accordance with high standards of international education”*. She provided a rather comprehensive definition, adding that *“the process includes the evaluation of academic programs, school infrastructure, governance systems, and teaching practices”*.

A similar view was expressed by teacher Dmitriy, who defined accreditation as *“a process of obtaining international certification that helps strengthen the school’s reputation”*. He also emphasized that a school must *“demonstrate compliance or willingness to comply with international standards”*.

Teacher Ramina, who had limited experience with accreditation, also gave a broad definition, stating that *“it is a certain procedure by which a school is evaluated according to criteria that it must meet based on international requirements”*. She also highlighted that accreditation covers the academic process, educational environment, the teaching staff, and their qualifications. In addition, Ramina mentioned *“a committee that inspects and evaluates the school”*. A similar definition was said by the school administrator Elena, who described accreditation as *“a process of receiving an independent evaluation from international organizations such as CIS, to recognize the school’s educational activities as compliant with international standards”*.

Parents of students also provided their definitions of international accreditation, mostly focusing on listing the benefits of accreditation. They associated it with competitiveness, improvement in the quality of education, and the enhancement of internal processes. For example, parent Zhanar stated: *“It’s about improving the quality of education, increasing trust in the school, its competitiveness, improving internal processes, and enabling access to foreign universities”*. For Yerzhan, the question was difficult, and he gave a brief answer: *“International Accreditation is when the school certificate is recognized when applying to foreign universities”*. Aigul offered a more complete definition: *“I understand that*

*International Accreditation means that the standards of education here meet international requirements”.*

The school co-owner Bolat characterized it as *“a process by which an international organization confirms that the school and its overall functioning comply with the standards set by that organization”.*

Thus, stakeholders interpreted this term differently depending on their role in the educational process. Teachers and administrators provided more complete and detailed definitions, while parents focused on the perceived benefits, such as the school’s competitiveness and the recognition of its certificates. The school co-owner emphasized the institutional aspect of the process.

### ***Key Incentives for School Stakeholders in Pursuing International Accreditation***

The study aimed to understand the motivations of stakeholders in pursuing international accreditation, which constitutes an important element of how accreditation is perceived overall. Participants were asked to describe the main incentives both for the organization in which they work and their personal motivations. In addition, they were asked to identify the key drivers for other stakeholders, which provided a broad range of perspectives and made it possible to identify overlapping views among participants. For example, Bolat noted that *“accreditation is primarily seen by school owners as a marketing tool”*. In his opinion, the goal of private schools is to enhance their authority in the educational market, which can help attract and retain students.

Bolat pointed out that the key factor for his organization was *“the desire to keep up with the times and to choose a direction for further development, primarily in terms of positioning the school in the education market”*. He also emphasized that accreditation would signify that the school he had established *“complies with international standards”*, which would make it possible to *“attract not only new students but also qualified teaching staff”*.

Dauren, the school principal, offered various perspectives. On the one hand, he identified his own motivations for initiating accreditation, and on the other, he spoke about what incentives are most important for other stakeholders. Thus, his answers reflect not only an individual attitude toward accreditation but also a broader picture of how this process is perceived within the school community. As he explained, the initiative to undergo international accreditation in this school came directly from him, and it was driven by the lack of strategic vision in the organization and the need to systematize its operations.

According to the principal, it was necessary to “*create a clear educational concept and standardize the key aspects of the learning process*”. He noted that before he joined the school, the organization struggled with identity, and frequent changes in the educational model had drawn criticism from colleagues of other private schools. He stated: “*When I arrived here, people were laughing at the school: one day you're a Finnish school, the next day – IB, and so on. The philosophy changed six times in one year*”. In his view, the lack of a clear concept also affected the trust in the school from other members of the community. : “*The school’s mission and its actual program didn’t align. What we promised parents didn’t match what was actually being delivered*”.

Summarizing, Dauren explained that CIS accreditation was intended to become a tool for bringing order to the school’s system of work and improving the quality of education. According to him, this was the main reason for proposing to the owners that the school begin the accreditation.

Reflecting on the motivations of private schools and their owners, he pointed to a general trend toward international accreditation in Kazakhstan, stating: “*Now all private schools have started the process*”. At the same time, he expressed the view that for most school owners, accreditation is primarily linked to business interests: “*Ninety percent of private schools think about the commercial aspect*”.

Dauren added that accreditation is seen as a tool for increasing the school's market appeal, as evidenced by his comments: *"The international school logo increases the value of the product," "they look at it in terms of advertising," or "they think that if you hang the logo – that's it, parents will come"*. At the same time, the director questioned the genuine desire of private schools to improve educational quality: *"I don't think the school is focused on the quality of the product. Owners look at it from an operational perspective. They save money on staffing. And it's the same in many schools"*.

When discussing parental motivation, Dauren noted that *"they come for international standards"*, adding that the CIS logo is seen as a mark of quality. In his view, parents *"primarily associate accreditation with opportunities for university admission"*. The principal's idea that admission to foreign universities is the key driver for parents was confirmed in interviews with the parents themselves.

Parent Zhanar stated that the main factor for her when choosing a school was *"easing the process of applying to foreign universities and the opportunity to take international exams"*. She also emphasized that the alignment of the school's program with international standards creates additional educational opportunities: *"It opens doors for further study and will simplify the admission process"*. A similar view was expressed by parent Yerzhan, who said that for most parents, the primary incentive is to increase their child's international competitiveness: *"The main criterion for any parent is the opportunity to try themselves abroad, and accreditation is associated with studying in other countries"*. At the same time, he noted that the presence of accreditation or the school's intention to obtain international status was not a decisive factor when choosing the school, saying: *"To be honest, it wasn't a big factor for me. I found out during the process that the school plans to become international. But even now, I'm not really sure what that means"*. According to him, other school-related criteria were much more important, as shown by his comment: *"I wasn't interested in the international*

*status. A parent wants to see things here and now. Before enrolling my son, I already knew the school from the inside. It had a reputation; people were talking about it. I also knew part of the teaching staff, saw stability at the school, even down to the guards – for several years, I saw the same people. And also the food. It felt like the school suited our mentality”.*

Parental responses also showed that a significant factor in choosing a school was the opportunity for instruction in English. As Yerzhan noted, *“For many parents, English proficiency is very important – that’s what the term ‘international school’ means in my everyday understanding”.*

The principal’s views on the key drivers for stakeholders aligned with the opinion of Elena, an administrative staff member responsible for parent communication. According to her, for school owners, accreditation is *“primarily about gaining additional competitive advantages over other private schools”*, whereas for parents, it is *“the quality of education and their children’s competitiveness”*.

In addition, Elena named her own main motivation for accreditation as a staff member, stating that *“accreditation is a lever for attracting parents,”* which also reflects the effectiveness of her work.

Interviews with teachers revealed generally similar perceptions of the key drivers for different stakeholder groups in the accreditation process. All three respondents expressed the view that the interest of business owners is primarily commercial. Teacher Aizhan noted that *“the goal pursued by the school founders is competitiveness”*. In her view, this *“makes it possible to create a unique product in the market that will attract a large number of clients, students, and their parents”*. Teacher Dmitriy stated that *“for private schools, the main task, like it or not, is business”*. Primary teacher Rayana gave a brief answer, saying that *“the main factor is attracting more clients”*.

The teachers also shared their views on the key drivers motivating parents to choose schools with an international component. Both Aizhan and Dmitriy mentioned the *“academic mobility of schools and the prospects of entering top, reputable institutions”* as key factors for parents.

At the same time, they identified high educational quality, opportunities for professional and personal growth, reputation, and school stability as the main drivers for teachers themselves. Aizhan highlighted the opportunity *“to grow professionally in an academically strong environment”* as her personal motivation. In her view, international status makes the school more attractive to parents, which in turn increases demand for enrollment. According to her, this *“leads to a selection of children with stronger academic backgrounds, high performance, and a desire to learn”*.

Aizhan also emphasized that one of her motivations is the opportunity to work in an organization that *“doesn’t stand still but keeps up with the times, improving its programs and practices”*. She also mentioned that the *“reputation and prestige”* of the school play an important role.

Additionally, the teacher sees accreditation as a potential competitive advantage in the labor market, as confirmed by her comment: *“Even if you move or change jobs, the line in your resume that you worked at a school following international standards will matter”*. Ramina briefly noted *“personal growth, professional development, and exchange of experience”* as her key motivations.

In contrast, teacher Dmitriy gave a more detailed description of key incentives for teachers. He remarked that *“from a teacher’s perspective, the question is ambiguous, debatable, and complex”*. An experienced educator, he shared that he had never really asked himself how much accreditation influences a teacher’s motivation when applying for a job or what specifically motivates teachers. However, Dmitriy suggested that accreditation for a

teacher “*is an indicator that the school operates steadily and is serious in its ambitions*”. At the same time, like his colleagues, he noted the “*development of human resources*”. When asked about his personal motivations, Dmitriy stated that he “*cannot imagine life outside an international school*”.

Interviews with stakeholders revealed that they are driven by various motivations in seeking international accreditation. Most respondents were convinced that for school owners, accreditation is a business tool, while for parents, it is a guarantee of their children’s competitiveness when applying to universities. These conclusions were confirmed in conversations with owners, who see accreditation as a marketing tool or market advantage, and parents, who associate it with opportunities for studying abroad. The school principal views accreditation as a means of systematizing work and strategic development, while teachers regard it as a factor in professional growth and career advancement.

### ***Advantages of International Accreditation***

The study aimed to identify the key advantages of international accreditation for individual stakeholders as well as for educational institutions as a whole. It should be noted that despite the structured nature of the interviews, which were designed to distinguish between questions on motivations and advantages, respondents often combined these aspects in their answers. Therefore, the researcher asked them to specifically identify the advantages that accreditation provides in general.

Principal noted that accreditation contributes to improving the quality of education, opens access for the school, teachers, and parents to international educational resources, enables benchmarking, and, in the context of Kazakhstan, makes it possible to obtain the status of an international school.

Speaking about the quality of education, Dauren referred to his previous experience working in a network of international schools. He described how he convinced the school

owners of the feasibility of undergoing CIS accreditation. According to him, the main argument was a *“high standard of teaching and learning quality”*. Dauren explained that during the CIS accreditation, there is a comprehensive modernization of the academic process: policies and curricula are reviewed, planning processes are improved, and individual approaches and differentiation of learning are introduced. He also shared that when persuading the owners, he cited NIS schools as an example, whose students demonstrated high academic results: *“I directly showed how accreditation influenced NIS schools and what results our students achieved on the PISA tests”*.

Another advantage noted by the principal was the process of self-evaluation carried out during accreditation, which allows schools to identify their strengths and areas for development: *“CIS allows us to analyse our own practices”*.

Dauren emphasized that CIS provides extensive opportunities for professional development. According to him, CIS serves as *“a global research hub where schools meet at forums, webinars, and trainings, and exchange experiences”*. He also noted that staff from accredited schools may join evaluation teams to adopt best practices.

The principal highlighted that experience in an accredited school opens additional career opportunities. He supported this point with a personal example: when applying for a job at an international school abroad, his experience with CIS was the key factor in his appointment as a school leader.

Dauren also mentioned that accreditation offers advantages for parents: *“CIS provides a university database where they can find useful information”*. He further identified an aspect related to market competition in the education sector. When persuading the owners of the value of CIS, he spoke about the potential to reach a benchmark in the field in order to *“compete in the education market”*.

Another advantage of accreditation in Kazakhstan, according to Dauren, is the possibility of obtaining international school status, which gives the school the right to implement a curriculum independent of the state standard. Additionally, he noted the *“flexibility of the accrediting organization’s approach”* to the curriculum as well as to other areas of the school’s activities.

Interviews with teachers revealed that they perceive accreditation as an opportunity for improvements across various areas of school operations. For example, teacher Dmitry stated: *“It covers infrastructure, safety, the quality of education and teaching, student well-being, and much more”*. He also described accreditation as an indicator of organizational sustainability: *“If it is obtained, it shows that the school is stable”*. Dmitry also touched upon career opportunities, stating: *“Working as a certified IB teacher will certainly impact my career”*. In addition, according to him, participation in the accreditation process *“helps enrich experience and better understand the philosophy of international programs such as IB”*. He also mentioned that accreditation increases the level of trust in the school from the community: *“Parents know that the CIS is a very serious organization, so they are more likely to trust such a school”*.

Aizhan also noted that with accreditation, *“educational programs, methodologies, and strategies used by teachers, as well as infrastructure, are improved”*. In her opinion, *“the process enhances the quality of education”*. According to her, accreditation also contributes to the development of inclusive education: *“Accreditation impacts the development of infrastructure and equipment so that children with special educational needs have the opportunity to study”*.

At the same time, parents generally did not demonstrate a deep understanding of the advantages of accreditation, more often associating it with aspects such as comfortable conditions, modern equipment, a stimulating environment, individualized approaches, instruction in English, and the development of personality and leadership qualities.

School owner Bolat noted that accreditation promotes stronger collaboration within the school: *“It enables closer interaction between owners and the management team. Throughout the process, they are required to engage more deeply in strategic planning. This strengthens cooperation”*. He also shared the opinion that accreditation increases the school’s potential due to a greater willingness to allocate resources: *“I believe that schools undergoing accreditation are fundamentally different from others in that they accepted this challenge, allocated resources, and began studying the issue. This is already a small victory and a good foundation for positive changes in the future, even if distant”*.

At the same time, Bolat expressed doubt that accreditation automatically leads to improvements: *“Improvements do occur, but their success varies greatly from school to school, as does their effectiveness. This is similar to university students obtaining diplomas — many receive them, but the quality of students remains very different”*.

Thus, stakeholders' perceptions of the advantages of international accreditation vary depending on their roles in the educational process. The school leader emphasized educational quality, professional community development, and career prospects; experienced teachers linked accreditation to systemic improvement of the entire school, while parents expressed more general views about its benefits.

### ***Disadvantages of International Accreditation***

Stakeholders were invited to share their perceptions of the disadvantages of international accreditation, understood as systemic issues inherent to the nature of the accreditation process in schools. It is important to note that the researcher distinguished between disadvantages and challenges, the latter being understood as difficulties encountered by stakeholders during the process.

Data analysis revealed two main disadvantages of international accreditation: the high financial burden on the school and the limited adaptation of standards to the national context.

For instance, Dauren noted that accreditation requires significant financial resources: *“It’s a lot of money... inviting experts, hotel stays, flights — all of that is expensive”*. Furthermore, according to Dauren, the financial burden does not decrease even after accreditation is granted.

It is worth noting that this issue was mentioned by all stakeholder groups. For example, Elena noted that accreditation affects the tuition fees for parents: *“We are already increasing the fees for high school students. The school pays membership fees — quite high fees — and this is reflected in the tuition cost. It becomes more expensive for parents”*.

English teacher Aizhan also mentioned the financial costs related to the need *“to bring the school in line with the standards, especially in areas where there is no systematic work”*. She emphasized that the most significant costs may arise when creating an inclusive learning environment: *“Primarily, these are financial costs related to improving infrastructure for inclusive education”*. She also reminded that schools begin paying membership fees immediately after starting the accreditation process, placing a burden on the school’s budget. In addition, she suggested that the cost of accreditation could be a restraining factor for some schools: *“Perhaps they postpone the process, realizing the financial costs it entails”*.

Parent Aigul also confirmed the significance of the financial aspect of accreditation, expressing concern about a potential increase in educational costs: *“Probably the tuition fees. If the school receives the status, the tuition fees for parents might increase. I would like to believe that the quality of the teaching staff will increase too”*.

Another disadvantage mentioned was the insufficient consideration of the local context in international standards, which complicates their adaptation to the national education system. For example, Aizhan stated that *“many indicators are developed without regard to the specifics of national education systems, which makes them difficult to interpret and implement”*.

Teacher Ramina, although she provided only a brief comment, expressed a similar opinion, stating that the content of international standards does not always align with the

specifics of local educational context: *“Accreditation standards don’t always fit our structure”*.

The principal also paid attention to the issue of alignment between standards and the local context. However, unlike other participants, he considered it mainly as a challenge of implementing standards within the local school setting, particularly regarding diversity — a point that will be explored in more detail in the next section.

Thus, the main disadvantages of accreditation are linked to its high cost and the limited flexibility of international standards in relation to national educational contexts. Some respondents emphasized the importance of a more adaptive approach from accrediting organizations, taking into account the cultural and structural specificities of each country. Interestingly, these stakeholder claims contrast with the core approaches of CIS accreditation, which highlight such principles as flexibility and neutrality in evaluation.

### ***Challenges in the Accreditation Process***

The study also aimed to identify the barriers stakeholders face during the accreditation process. Respondents described a wide range of difficulties — from practical ones (resources and time) to those affecting school culture and internal communication. The most frequently mentioned challenges included a low level of understanding of accreditation, resistance to change, limited resources, heavy workloads, and lack of time. The most comprehensive picture was provided by the school principal, who outlined both systemic and cultural barriers. Other stakeholders gave shorter responses, which reflects their level of involvement in the process. The section begins with challenges mentioned by several groups, followed by those raised by individual stakeholder categories.

One of the most commonly mentioned difficulties was the insufficient awareness among the school community about the essence, goals, and value of accreditation. The principal pointed this out directly in his comment: *“Many people don’t understand what CIS*

is. *We have to constantly explain what it gives us*". He also emphasized the need for systematic explanatory work with parents: "Most private schools don't share information with parents about the benefits and opportunities that accreditation offers". The principal described his experience working at an international school abroad in this area: *"We regularly held seminars, training sessions, and engaged the parent community. We invited them to review the school's mission and vision"*. He also noted that informational work is important in justifying how parental tuition payments are used.

The school's co-owner, Bolat, shared the principal's view, highlighting the low level of awareness among parents and students regarding the benefits of accreditation. He commented, *"Accrediting organizations should pay more attention to directly educating parents and students about the value of the services they provide"*. He also noted that explanatory work *"adds an extra burden to the school"*.

According to teacher Dmitriy, the staff lacks a clear understanding: *"Not all teachers see the need for international accreditation; not all understand the complex requirements that come with it"*. He also expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the school's internal communication: *"There's no sense that people really understand the fundamentals"*.

Primary school teacher Ramina also mentioned *"a lack of preparedness and awareness among staff about CIS"*, confirming that this opinion is widely shared among educators.

Another frequently cited challenge was the resource-intensive nature of the process. Principal Dauren repeatedly emphasized the workload and resource demands placed on the school, recalling his experience with accreditation abroad: *"It's a very long process. You need to study many issues. You need analytical data – how many policies and procedures we have, what standards exist in the school. How we consider individual student needs, whether we apply differentiation, and how we plan lessons. Basically, it changes everything we do by 360 degrees"*.

Teachers also spoke about the workload. For example, Dmitriy noted, *“Accreditation is a long process that requires coordinated work over two or three years”*. Aizhan shared a similar view: *“It’s a really big volume of work. It involves every member of the community and includes working with documents, parents, students, as well as conducting lessons”*.

In addition, stakeholders pointed to a lack of both human and time resources in the school. For example, the co-owner suggested that limited resources could be a factor preventing successful accreditation: *“Challenges may arise mainly due to a lack of resources available to the school. I wouldn’t rule out that additional resources may be needed in the future”*.

The principal elaborated on the staffing issue, drawing on his past experience. In his view, many schools lack the qualified personnel to meet international standards, especially in areas such as child protection and support for students with special needs. He commented: *“In some schools, there may be three psychologists, but they don’t understand child protection. There are many nuances related to student well-being. And we also have very few specialists in special education. Universities don’t prepare them”*.

According to the principal, this mismatch is linked to national legal and societal factors: *“They tell us we should have a relaxation room, designated areas for students with special needs. But I explained that we just don’t have those standards in our country. Other countries spent 50 years building that”*.

Dauren also emphasized that weak professional preparation makes it harder to implement international standards and prolongs the accreditation process: *“I’ve seen cases where the process is prolonged on for five or six years because the community isn’t ready in terms of staffing”*. Some teachers also mentioned the lack of time for accreditation-related work. Ramina shared: *“I have very little time left to study the school’s policies”*.

In addition to resource limitations, stakeholders often highlighted the additional workload. Elena noted: *“It’s a big burden on the staff. We’re forced to work with a large*

number of documents to align them with CIS requirements. We also have to gather evidence, which is in short supply”. Teacher Dmitriy added: “*Very often, we end up building everything at the last minute – that’s not right, it adds too much to our regular workload*”.

Beyond resource issues, stakeholders also described internal barriers. One of these, according to respondents, is resistance to change among school personnel. The principal said he encountered this both in Kazakhstan and abroad: “*Many communities are not ready to accept international standards. They want to do everything the old way; they’re not ready to change traditional systems and approaches*”. Teacher Aizhan also mentioned this phenomenon: “*As far as the teaching staff goes, I see resistance. Any changes affect their usual routines. Not all teachers are ready to revise programs and plans*”. She added that this is due to the natural “*fear of a large workload*”.

Moreover, stakeholders suggested that these difficulties are often rooted in psychological attitudes and professional habits. Dauren emphasized that in many school cultures, people are afraid to make mistakes, are used to waiting for instructions “*from above*”, and lack collaboration. He said: “*There’s no teamwork,*” “*they wait for decisions from the principal,*” and “*they’re afraid to provide incorrect information*”.

The principal’s reflections on challenges in adapting concepts like diversity and inclusive education in a more conservative society are also noteworthy. According to Dauren, international standards that promote inclusiveness, tolerance, and cultural diversity often clash with local traditions.

For example, he described how gender equality content is taboo in many schools, which creates difficulties in implementing international standards: “*In some countries, especially Muslim ones, it’s very difficult to touch on the issue of diversity*”. He cited an incident in a school library where a book with an illustration of a same-sex relationship provoked parental dissatisfaction.

According to Dauren, similar challenges may arise with inclusive education. He explained that international standards expect children with special educational needs to learn alongside their peers, whereas in some countries, such students are taught in separate settings.

In this context, the principal called for a more flexible approach in applying certain standards based on the unique characteristics of each society: *“Western culture is being imposed on Asian culture in this regard. It would be better if schools could adapt some standards instead of applying them unchanged”*.

Based on the analysis of stakeholder views, it can be concluded that international accreditation is perceived as a labor-intensive and resource-demanding process, accompanied by various challenges. The most frequently mentioned difficulties, raised across all stakeholder groups, included limited resources, lack of time, and high additional workload for staff. Furthermore, the insufficient understanding of the purpose and principles of accreditation emerged as a systemic issue affecting the entire school community. Additional barriers include communication and cultural factors, such as resistance to change, fear of mistakes, and difficulties in accepting values from other cultures.

#### ***Accreditation as a Process of Ongoing Systemic Improvement in School Operations***

Another aim of the study was to explore the extent to which stakeholders perceive accreditation as a process aimed at ongoing and systemic improvements in school operations, rather than as an inspection or evaluation. As mentioned above, the idea of continuous improvement is a key principle of accreditation in organizations such as CIS, and representatives of this organization expect to see sustainable development throughout the entire accreditation cycle.

The interview responses demonstrated a general understanding of the principle of systemic improvement and an awareness of its importance among stakeholders. As the principal stated: *“CIS wants to see that the school has demonstrated progress throughout the*

entire cycle. And this applies not only to academic but also to pastoral care and safeguarding policies”. He also emphasized the importance of step-by-step work: *“Accreditation is a long-term process — what can we improve in this or that area”*.

Staff member Elena shared that she views accreditation not just as an inspection, but as a necessity for the continuous development and improvement of the school. She added that CIS helps schools identify their strengths and areas for growth.

Teacher Dmitry also emphasized: *“The school must present itself as a continuously evolving organism”*, and that *“improvements must be made by all stakeholders — the owners, the administration, and the teachers”*. He further commented:

*True accreditation is a long-term, coordinated process over several years, allowing schools to identify and improve areas step by step. While accreditation can be achieved without profound changes, real transformation is needed for a school to become a coherent, well-functioning system.*

Dmitriy also expressed confidence that *“if the school is constantly improving its work, that is the right kind of accreditation”*. According to him, this process requires a systemic approach throughout the school, where *“the community comes together, discusses what needs to be changed, and fosters innovation in teaching”*.

A similar understanding was expressed by teacher Aizhan, who emphasized that *“the accreditation process implies continuous and step-by-step development of the school”*. In her view, accreditation can serve as a stimulus for quality improvements across various areas: *“During this process, the school grows. There is development in teaching and learning... There’s also development in terms of the well-being of all community members... the school keeps up with the times, improving its practices and programs”*.

At the same time, school co-owner Bolat expressed doubt about the impact of accreditation on systemic change: *“Perhaps there are enthusiasts who believe in real change,*

*but in my observation, the accreditation process tends to resemble adherence to formal procedures, which do not guarantee immediate improvements”.*

Although the respondents themselves demonstrated a sound understanding of accreditation principles, they also noted that this understanding was often lacking at the broader school community level. In their opinion, accreditation is often perceived by staff as an external inspection, where the goal is to demonstrate compliance with standards rather than to ensure real progress. This was supported by teacher Dmitry, who commented:

*“People don’t understand it. You don’t see that accreditation is being perceived correctly. If someone gives us a task, we just complete it— and that’s it. But the idea that we should be developing step by step, improving through the standards — that’s not evident yet”*

Dmitry also mentioned that when schools don’t work systematically throughout the preparation period, they rush to prepare just before the visit: *“If we do everything at the last minute, that’s not improvement. That’s just an attempt to meet certain criteria, nothing more”.*

Teacher Aizhan also shared her concern that the school lacks a proper understanding of the accreditation process: *“Only a limited number of community members understand that it’s not a one-off process. It’s a sequential and ongoing process”.* Moreover, she noted that the school community often views accreditation as an external inspection: *“Possibly due to the legacy of the Soviet system, many still see accreditation not as a tool to support school development but as an audit to determine whether the institution meets the required criteria or not”.*

Staff member Elena shared a similar view, suggesting that it is teachers in particular who may have a weaker understanding of this concept.

Principal Dauren, who also has experience as a CIS evaluator, stressed that in practice, school staff often do not grasp the true nature of accreditation. He shared examples of schools that had prepared superficially, focusing only on the appearance:

*“I visited schools that were not ready for accreditation. They rushed their preparations, but the internal substance was missing. The school had a thousand flags, showcased their canteens, held pajama days and Halloween. But once you change the conversation a bit, the staff get lost”.*

According to Dauren, the approach taken by many schools reflects a misperception of accreditation, where they try to create an “*aesthetic facade*” before the visit. He added that the perception of accreditation as an inspection is deeply rooted in the minds of school stakeholders: “*Many people in Kazakhstan, both in private and public schools, think of it as a certification or inspection. Teachers have developed the mindset that it’s a committee conducting an external evaluation based on a ‘pass/fail’ principle*”. He also shared reflections from his evaluator experience, noting that he often had to convince school staff not to see him as an inspector, but rather as a “*critical friend who came to help*”.

Dauren explained that CIS evaluators can easily detect fabrication and superficiality when schools rely only on external appearances without deep internal improvements: “*They notice everything — in classrooms, conversations with parents, students, teachers, and leadership. By interviewing stakeholders, they piece together the puzzle — and if it doesn’t fit, that’s a problem. When masks come off, inconsistencies in school culture become visible*”.

In this context, the principal drew a parallel with the concept of the “*cultural iceberg*”, emphasizing that the visible part only superficially reflects the actual culture of the organization.

He also highlighted that a key indicator of the school’s internal culture is the presence of a hidden curriculum, which is particularly important for CIS representatives.

Considering all of the above, stakeholders emphasized the insufficient level of communication within the school community, which complicates the perception of accreditation as a process of ongoing systemic improvement.

The principal suggested that many schools do not conduct adequate information work: *“The biggest mistake of many schools is that they don’t explain why we are going through CIS. Staff have no idea where the organization is heading or what its strategic goals are”*.

Teachers also pointed out the lack of explanatory work. According to Dmitry, *“This is not being clarified among staff; it’s limited to meetings only”*, while Ramina said that *“this is not sufficiently explained among teachers”*.

Staff member Elena, when discussing community involvement, noted *“the passive position of parents”* regarding accreditation. At the same time, parents commented on their involvement in different ways. Parent Erzhan said that he does not feel involved, adding that it is not a priority for him. Parent Aigul stated that she was only aware of the involvement of other parents: *“I personally wasn’t involved, but I know that parents are participating in various events as part of the accreditation preparations”*.

At the same time, stakeholders offered recommendations for improving communication within the school community, emphasizing that the key role in this process belongs to school leadership.

According to Dauren, the school must first have a clear vision and strategy, which should be systematically communicated to the entire staff: *“The head of school must communicate the vision, engage parents through seminars, and ensure someone understands accreditation. Much depends on leadership to explain the process, align it with the strategic plan, and act as a driver for change. He also stressed the importance of collaboration: “There should be teams, leaders at the level of coordinators, deputies, and teachers who can gather and convey the principal’s vision to the staff”*.

Teacher Dmitriy also shared several suggestions. In his view, before beginning accreditation, the school should thoroughly analyze its current practices and identify which changes are needed to implement international standards: *“From the very beginning, the school needs to understand what the requirements are, what is expected. What we have now, and what we can do to improve the school”*. He also highlighted the importance of planning: *“From the start, we need to define a long-term and short-term plan”*. Dmitry likewise emphasized the importance of teamwork and internal alignment.

Teacher Aigerim focused on the pivotal role of school leadership in shaping the community’s understanding: *“Everything depends on school leadership. The way the school administration understands this process — as one of continuous improvement — influences how teachers perceive it too”*.

Finally, staff member Elena underlined the importance of involving the entire community and maintaining ongoing feedback: *“The main thing is to set clear tasks and define the goals. The whole team should be involved, so the entire staff understands where the school is heading and what the accrediting organization expects”*

### **Summary**

This chapter provided the researcher with a comprehensive understanding of how various stakeholders of a private school in Kazakhstan perceive international accreditation. Its structure was built in alignment with the research questions, which enabled a consistent presentation of each participant group’s perspectives and facilitated the identification of patterns and trends in their perceptions. The compilation of the collected data helped form a multifaceted picture — from the understanding of international accreditation as a process of systemic improvement to views on key motivations, benefits, drawbacks, and challenges encountered on the path to accreditation. The findings presented in this chapter will serve as a basis for analytical interpretation in the next chapter and will contribute to the development of

practical recommendations for schools that are in the stage of preparing for or undergoing international accreditation.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

### ***Introduction***

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the key findings presented in the previous chapter. It analyses the findings, links them to the research questions, and compares it with existing academic literature.

This study explored the perceptions of international accreditation among school stakeholders within the context of a private school in Kazakhstan. The research questions addressed several aspects, including the stakeholders' motivations for pursuing international accreditation, their views on its benefits and drawbacks, the challenges encountered during the process, and the extent to which accreditation is understood as a systemic and sustainable improvement mechanism.

A qualitative methodology involved interviews with representatives of different stakeholder groups.

The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section analyzes and interprets the thematic categories identified in the study, highlighting their significance and comparing them with findings from academic sources. The second section considers how much the data collected addresses the research questions.

### ***Analysis of Findings by Key Thematic Categories***

#### *Understanding of the Term “International Accreditation”*

The analysis of the interview data revealed that different stakeholders had their own understanding and interpretation of the international accreditation, depending on their role within the educational community.

Teachers and members of the school administration offered more detailed and professional definitions. Their use of terms such as “*independent evaluation process*” and “*compliance with international standards*” indicates a sound understanding of the core

principles of international accreditation. Notably, such terminology is frequently found in the academic literature (Ibrahim, 2014; Istileulova, 2013).

In contrast, parents of students primarily referred to the perceived benefits of accreditation, such as increased school competitiveness or improved opportunities for university admission. This suggests that some parents may lack a more structured understanding of the accreditation process.

It appears that parents' level of involvement in the accreditation process is relatively low. During the interviews, the researcher specifically asked parents whether they were engaged in or informed about the accreditation process, to which they responded negatively. Based on these responses, the researcher assumes that the school may not be placing sufficient emphasis on communicating with and involving parents in this regard. This highlights the importance of effective communication strategies within the school community to ensure that all stakeholders are adequately informed and engaged.

At the same time, the researcher noted that some stakeholders demonstrated a deep and well-articulated understanding of the term "international accreditation," which may be explained by their previous experience with accreditation processes.

A particular surprise for the researcher was the more detailed explanation provided by the school co-owner, especially given his own comment that "*the role of the owner does not require deep involvement in the process*". This level of awareness might be explained by the respondent's extensive experience in school management, including operational roles in private schools over many years. It is also important to note that only one representative from this stakeholder group participated in the study, which limits the extent to which generalizations can be made about school owners' perceptions of accreditation.

### *Key Motivations for School Stakeholders in Pursuing International Accreditation*

#### *School Owners*

The analysis revealed that most respondents viewed potential commercial benefits as the primary driver of international accreditation for private school owners. Specifically, the school principal, an administrative staff member, and several teachers noted that owners often perceive accreditation as a marketing tool to enhance the school's market competitiveness, attract parents, and retain students.

This commercial interpretation of accreditation is echoed in several academic sources. For example, Adiyaman and Özmantar (2023) emphasize that private school owners often see accreditation as a means of increasing a school's investment appeal. Fertig (2007) notes that in competitive educational markets, accreditation is an external marker of quality that helps attract and retain students. Similarly, Scherer et al. (2005) describe accreditation as a strategic instrument to strengthen a school's market position.

The respondents' viewpoint was supported by the co-owner of the school, who openly stated that accreditation is viewed as a commercial strategy to enhance the school's standing in the education market. The consistency in these responses suggests that the co-owners of the studied school primarily see accreditation as a tool to improve market competitiveness.

Interestingly, that the owner articulated this motivation openly. It had been expected that such reasoning, if mentioned, would be expressed more cautiously. However, in this case, it was stated rather directly. At the same time, the co-owner also acknowledged the strategic value of accreditation in attracting qualified educators and supporting long-term school development. This indicates a broader understanding of accreditation's significance, which is confirmed in other parts of the study.

### *School Leaders*

Unlike other participants, the school principal identified multiple key drivers for pursuing accreditation, including improving educational quality, fostering strategic development, systematizing internal processes, and developing a clear academic vision for the

school. It is worth noting that the initiative to pursue CIS accreditation in this school originated from the principal himself. His motivation was driven by the need to establish a strategic development plan, define a coherent governance structure, and clarify the school's mission and long-term goals.

These motivations reflect the principal's strong professional background, including his working experience in the NIS school system, where quality assurance and strategic planning are priorities. His international perspective and experience also inform his understanding of accreditation.

Notably, the accreditation initiative came from the principal rather than the school owners, suggesting a high degree of professional autonomy and trust from the owners. This may also reflect a healthy organizational culture that empowers school leaders.

The principal's motivations align with existing literature. For example, Bryant (2013) observes that school administrators often view accreditation as a means to improve governance systems, enhance educational quality, and strengthen institutional reputation.

The principal's critical stance toward the motivations of private schools in general was of particular interest. He expressed doubts about whether such schools genuinely aim to improve quality through accreditation—referring not only to owners but potentially to other school leaders. This may reflect a degree of skepticism toward how accreditation is approached in the private educational sector.

Despite the drivers described in detail by the principal, it would be inaccurate to generalize his views to all school leaders. His perceptions are shaped by his individual professional journey and the trusting relationship he has with the school's owners. The researcher recognizes that not all school leaders may share the same awareness or freedom to act. As with school owners, leadership motivations may vary depending on the school context.

### *Teachers*

The findings indicate that teachers are primarily motivated by the opportunity to work in a strong academic environment that supports their personal and professional development. In addition, teachers preferred working in a stable, reputable institution that offers career advancement opportunities.

These insights may be of value to decision-makers seeking to understand what influences teacher motivation more broadly. The emphasis on professional growth may also reflect the competitive nature of the teaching job market, where experience in an internationally accredited school provides a significant advantage. Moreover, teachers appear well-informed about the professional development opportunities accrediting agencies offer.

This level of awareness surprised the researcher. Teachers clearly and thoughtfully understood the link between accreditation and career progression. Their reflective responses suggest a high level of engagement with the broader goals and benefits of accreditation.

These findings are supported by previous studies. For instance, Bryant (2013) highlights that the teachers view accreditation as a framework that establishes standards for professional development, teaching quality, and research. Istileulova (2013) also notes that educators perceive accreditation as an opportunity for academic and professional growth. Aizhan, an English teacher, echoed these perspectives and emphasized professional development in an academically strong environment.

Furthermore, as Ibrahim et al. (2015) point out, accreditation can help ensure recognition of teaching qualifications and enhance employment prospects—views expressed by both Aizhan and Dmitriy during their interviews.

### *Parents*

The analysis showed that all parent participants were primarily motivated by their children's future educational opportunities—specifically, university admissions abroad. They viewed international schooling as a way to prepare for international exams and gain a

competitive edge over other students. Two parents also mentioned that studying subjects in English is an additional advantage.

It is important to note that other stakeholders, including the school director, administrative staff, and teachers, shared this perception in relation to parents. According to their observations, parents are mainly motivated to increase their child's competitiveness and improve chances for admission to foreign universities.

However, the interviews also revealed that not all parents had a clear understanding of what accreditation entails. Their responses were often brief and limited in scope.

These findings suggest that, in this context, parents are driven by pragmatic considerations and are less concerned with the substantive meaning of international accreditation. This may reflect broader concerns about the quality of higher education within the country. It may also relate to a general trend in Kazakhstani private schools, where families have higher financial capacity and aim for international academic pathways.

Moreover, the limited awareness of what accreditation involves may point to the school's insufficient outreach and communication efforts.

These observations are supported by existing literature. Hayden and Thompson (2013) argue that many modern parents see international schooling as a gateway to global education. They often perceive such schools as prestigious institutions that offer access to broader opportunities. The authors also suggest that the growing popularity of international schools may be linked to dissatisfaction with national education systems.

However, when comparing interview results with academic perspectives, it becomes evident that parents at the studied school tend to have a narrow and predominantly pragmatic understanding of international accreditation. As Hayden and Thompson (2013) note, school stakeholders are often inspired by ideological values such as global citizenship, environmental

responsibility, and social justice in addition to pragmatic goals. None of these values were mentioned by the parents interviewed.

Hayden and Thompson (2013) also describe the motivations of expatriate parents temporarily living abroad who seek international-level education to ensure their children remain aligned with the curriculum of their home countries. According to available information, some students at the studied school come from such families, and their responses would likely have confirmed this point. However, no parents from expatriate families were interviewed, which highlights the limitations of the sample.

One comment from a parent stood out to the researcher. When asked about the significance of international accreditation, the parent emphasized that what mattered most was the presence of strong internal systems, a safe environment, and overall comfort within the school.

#### *Advantages of International Accreditation*

The analysis of the interviews revealed that almost all stakeholder groups demonstrated a broad understanding of the advantages of international accreditation, perceiving it as an opportunity to drive improvement in various areas of school life. Despite some variation in perspectives, most respondents agreed that accreditation facilitates positive change at both the institutional level and in the professional development of school staff.

The school principal outlined a wide range of benefits. These included high standards of education quality, which, in his view, lead to long-term growth in students' academic potential; access to international educational resources for all members of the school community; development of mechanisms for self-reflection and professional learning; improved competitiveness of the school; more excellent career opportunities for staff; and the ability to obtain official international school status within the Kazakhstani context.

Teachers, in turn, identified benefits such as improved infrastructure, enhanced safety measures, and more effective pedagogical practices. At a personal level, all interviewed teachers viewed participation in the accreditation process as a means of professional and career advancement.

According to the school co-owner, accreditation also enhances internal cooperation within the organization and lays the groundwork for broader institutional improvements. This view aligns more closely with the perspectives of other stakeholders who are more closely involved in the school's academic processes. At the same time, the researcher found it noteworthy that the co-owner pointed out that accreditation alone does not automatically lead to school improvement.

In contrast, parents did not demonstrate a deep understanding of the specific benefits of accreditation. Nevertheless, they were able to identify improvements they associate with accredited schools, such as better learning conditions and a more supportive environment.

The director's comprehensive view of accreditation benefits can be explained by his extensive professional experience, as he had previously been responsible for persuading school owners to pursue accreditation. It may also be attributed to his current role, which requires him to be actively involved in both strategic leadership and the academic domain.

The responses from teachers are likely shaped by their prior experience with CIS accreditation in other schools. The improvements they cited may reflect positive changes they observed in previous institutions. This background contributes to their perception of accreditation as an effective mechanism for school development. Moreover, their views on accreditation as a tool for career advancement suggest an awareness of how accreditation can enhance their professional marketability. This may also reflect a broader trend among modern educators to prioritize professional growth.

While parents expressed a general understanding of the improvements associated with accreditation, their responses tended to focus on external attributes—such as comfort, facilities, and learning conditions—rather than on internal systemic changes. This may once again highlight a limited awareness among parents of the true nature of international accreditation, underscoring the need for more targeted communication from the school.

The benefits described by stakeholders are reflected in the academic literature. Both institutional and professional advantages are reflected in the work of authors such as Ibrahim (2014), Istileulova (2013), Hayden and Thompson (2008, 2013), Bryant (2013), Fertig (2007), and Adiyaman and Özmantar (2023).

For example, the emphasis placed by the director and teachers on improving educational quality aligns with findings from Ibrahim (2014) and Istileulova (2013), who view accreditation as a mechanism for ensuring high academic standards. The director's comments on access to global resources and events are echoed by Ismail (2023), who notes that accreditation broadens opportunities for collaboration with international institutions. Teachers' views on career development are consistent with Ibrahim et al. (2015) and Bryant (2013), who highlight accreditation as a driver of professional growth and institutional appeal. The director's reference to obtaining international school status also aligns with Hayden et al. (2002), who identified departure from national curricula as a historically significant feature of international schools. In addition, Coutet (2022) emphasizes the role of accreditation in fostering internal organizational engagement, which mirrors the co-owner's remarks about enhanced cooperation within the school.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the perceived advantages of international accreditation among stakeholders in private schools in Kazakhstan are largely in line with international trends, reinforcing the understanding of accreditation as a tool for quality assurance, development, and competitiveness.

At the same time, despite the clarity of the responses received, generalizing these findings regarding the drivers for each stakeholder group is challenging due to the limited sample. Since this study focused on a single school, it isn't easy to assert with certainty that stakeholders in other private schools across Kazakhstan share the same motivations. However, given the similar conditions in which private schools operate within a unified educational system, it is reasonable to suggest that the identified key drivers largely reflect broader trends within this sector.

Moreover, the responses revealed that stakeholders' motivations differ depending on their role within the school. This observation will be further explored in the final chapter, which highlights the importance of strategically managing the motivations of all stakeholders as a key factor in achieving success in the accreditation.

#### *Drawbacks of International Accreditation*

The analysis of the interviews revealed two key drawbacks of international accreditation, as perceived by school stakeholders: the high financial burden on schools and the limited adaptability of international standards to local educational contexts. According to the respondents, both aspects may negatively impact the overall effectiveness of the accreditation process.

Almost all participants referred to the high costs associated with accreditation. The school principal highlighted substantial expenditures related to inviting external experts, covering travel and accommodation expenses. An administrative staff member noted that these costs could lead to an increase in tuition fees, which would cause concern among parents. Teachers, in turn, focused on financial pressures associated with developing inclusive practices and delivering additional staff training.

These findings suggest that respondents may have previously observed the financial implications of accreditation processes in other institutions where they had worked. It is also

likely that similar challenges exist in the school, which may influence stakeholders' current perceptions of accreditation as a resource-intensive process.

Of particular interest to the researcher was a comment made by an English teacher, who suggested that the anticipated financial costs of accreditation may serve as a deterrent for some private schools. This observation underscores the importance of long-term financial planning. Without a clear understanding of the full scope of expenditures involved, schools may encounter difficulties during the accreditation process, which could potentially undermine their overall efficiency.

Another frequently mentioned drawback, particularly among teachers, was the perceived lack of flexibility in international accreditation standards, which were viewed as insufficiently responsive to the unique characteristics of national education systems. These views may be linked to teachers' direct involvement in curriculum delivery. In some cases, such perceptions could stem from a lack of collaborative culture within the school, limiting opportunities for staff to jointly reflect on how to contextualize international standards within the local curriculum. Moreover, this feedback may reflect a natural resistance to change among educators accustomed to long-standing pedagogical approaches.

The drawbacks articulated by respondents are consistent with concerns found in the academic literature. Istileulova (2013) and Wilson-Hail et al. (2019), for instance, emphasise that international accreditation requires substantial financial investment, a finding that aligns with stakeholders' concern about the economic demands of the process. Adiyaman and Özmantar (2023) similarly note that many schools are unable to pursue international accreditation due to high costs, an idea that resonates with the English teacher's observation that financial constraints may deter some institutions from initiating the process.

The question of standard flexibility is also a subject of active discussion in scholarly sources. Fertig (2007) warns that the use of generic indicators can undermine the uniqueness

of individual schools and lead to a homogenization of practice. Sziegat (2021) highlights the difficulty of aligning international standards with national education frameworks. Additionally, Coutet (2022) illustrates how rigid accreditation frameworks and assessment tools can create an image of the “ideal school” that does not accurately reflect local realities, thereby limiting flexibility, innovation, and professional autonomy in schools.

The literature also highlights the concept of institutional isomorphism as a potential drawback of accreditation. Scholars note that this phenomenon—where institutions increasingly resemble one another—can result in the erosion of school individuality and innovation. It is particularly noteworthy that none of the respondents in the current study directly mentioned this issue, which may indicate either limited awareness of long-term structural effects or a greater focus on practical concerns during the accreditation process.

In summary, comparing the stakeholders' views with insights from the literature reveals that the identified drawbacks are not unique to the case study school but reflect broader concerns encountered by many schools engaged in international accreditation.

### *Challenges in the Accreditation Process*

The analysis of participants' responses suggests that international accreditation is a complex process requiring significant human, temporal, and organizational efforts. Throughout the interviews, stakeholders described the challenges they encountered at various stages of the accreditation journey. These challenges encompassed both practical aspects and deeper systemic barriers.

One of the most frequently mentioned difficulties was the low level of awareness among members of the school community regarding the goals, nature, and core principles of international accreditation. This insufficient understanding of the tasks the school team is working on diminishes motivation for engagement and contributes to the development of distrust and passivity. For school leadership, this represents a critical signal, as leaders are

responsible for fostering a shared understanding and organizing effective communication within the community. Notably, this issue was highlighted by almost all stakeholder groups, indicating potential systemic gaps in the school's communication policy and emphasizing the need for its improvement.

Equally significant challenges identified by respondents related to organizational difficulties, including the labor-intensive nature of the process, time constraints, and considerable workload on staff. These issues were particularly emphasized by teachers, likely reflecting their objective overburdening and perception of accreditation as an additional responsibility layered on top of their core teaching duties. These challenges may point to a lack of internal coordination within the team, inefficient task and resource allocation, and the absence of a systematic approach to managing time and workload. Such findings underscore the importance for school leaders to plan the distribution of responsibilities, time management, and working conditions in advance to ensure the effective participation of staff in the accreditation process.

The interviews also revealed that schools often lack specialists with the necessary competencies to navigate accreditation successfully. This may indicate that schools do not always engage in early planning for the human resources required for the process. Furthermore, this could reflect a broader systemic issue in Kazakhstan's education sector — a shortage of adequately prepared specialists within schools and a lack of strategic planning.

It is evident that schools embarking on the path of accreditation need to begin with an assessment of their human resources and establish an organizational structure that incorporates the necessary expertise.

Internal barriers identified by participants, such as resistance to change, fear of making mistakes, and reliance on top-down directives, suggest a need for the transformation of organizational culture within schools.

A particularly noteworthy observation was made by the school director regarding the challenges of integrating concepts such as diversity and inclusive education into the local cultural context. This highlights the reality that contemporary schools operate within increasingly diverse environments, underlining the growing need for international accrediting bodies to consider local specificities.

The challenges identified in stakeholder interviews align closely with findings in the academic literature. For instance, studies by Istileulova (2013) and Wilson-Hail et al. (2019) point to the labor-intensive nature of accreditation. These authors emphasize that excessive administrative burdens can detract from other critical school priorities and lead to staff stress. Similarly, teacher complaints about time constraints and workload pressures are documented in the research by Gaharan et al. (2007), which stresses that teacher involvement in accreditation increases their responsibilities without reducing their primary teaching obligations.

The frequently cited issue of low staff awareness about accreditation was also echoed in studies by Attree & Neher (2023) and Khurram et al. (2020). Participants in these studies noted that teachers and other staff members often lack understanding of the objectives, stages, and significance of accreditation, which hinders their engagement and effectiveness in the process.

The interviews, which revealed a range of key challenges encountered by stakeholders during the accreditation process, provide an informative response to this research question.

The data helps to clarify that school stakeholders face various difficulties throughout the accreditation process, including low levels of community awareness, staff overload, the labor-intensive nature of the process, a shortage of qualified specialists, and internal barriers within the organizational culture.

However, despite the diversity of challenges identified, it is essential to acknowledge that the data does not capture all possible difficulties that might arise in other schools. As a complex and multifaceted process, the success of accreditation depends heavily on the context of each individual school, including its resources, governance structure, professional competencies, and the effectiveness of its communication strategies.

Nevertheless, the consistency of the stakeholders' responses suggests that these challenges are significant and likely relevant to private schools across Kazakhstan. This underscores the necessity for school leaders to adopt a strategic and deliberate approach to accreditation. Furthermore, schools preparing for accreditation must account for numerous factors in advance, including budgeting, staffing, the establishment of an effective organizational structure, and the development of a robust communication strategy. The findings lay the groundwork for further discussion on how awareness of potential challenges can help schools better plan their accreditation processes.

#### *Accreditation as a Process of Systematic and Continuous School Improvement*

One of the aims of the interviews was to explore whether stakeholders perceive international accreditation as a process of systematic and continuous school development, which is crucial for ensuring the quality and sustainability of the accreditation journey.

The data analysis revealed that although the respondents themselves demonstrated an understanding of accreditation as a tool for systematic improvement, they believed that such a perception had not yet been fully established in the broader school community. This suggests that the idea of accreditation as a process of ongoing development has not yet become embedded in the school's collective culture. Such a situation may pose a challenge, particularly during the preparation stage, when the school is expected to demonstrate progress across all areas of its operations. Respondents reported frequently encountering misunderstandings from colleagues or parents regarding the essence of accreditation. This may result from insufficient

informational and explanatory work within the school, as well as a lack of prior experience among some staff members. At the same time, given that the school is relatively young and has only recently embarked on its accreditation journey, this level of awareness may be considered expected. In this context, the comment of one teacher, who described accreditation as a process of growth and development for the school, stands out. It is possible that her view was shaped by positive prior experiences in which she observed tangible improvements resulting from accreditation.

Another important finding was that accreditation is often perceived as an external inspection rather than as a process of continuous improvement. This was particularly emphasized by the teachers involved in accreditation preparation, who noted a sense of urgency and a formalistic approach within the school before visits by accrediting bodies. Such perceptions may indicate a lack of systematic work and long-term planning. Notably, both teachers and the principal acknowledged that this perception is common not only in their school but also in many others. This suggests a broader professional culture in which accreditation is primarily viewed as a form of oversight. Such an approach limits the potential of accreditation as a developmental tool, highlighting the need to shift these perceptions within the school community.

The analysis of the interviews also revealed that this misperception of accreditation is primarily driven by ineffective communication within the school. Significantly, this issue was raised by teachers and staff rather than by leadership. In their view, the school community fails to understand the purpose of accreditation due to the absence of systematic communication. This finding is significant for school leaders responsible for the effective implementation of accreditation, as it points to the need to review existing communication channels and enhance explanatory efforts in this area.

Furthermore, according to stakeholders, school leadership plays a key role in these communication efforts. They believe that leaders should not only share the school's mission and strategic plans but also regularly explain to staff the purpose of accreditation and how it aligns with the school's development. It is worth noting that this point was frequently raised by teachers and staff. The principal, however, also confirmed this view, emphasizing that communicating the organization's strategic goals and direction is indeed a leadership responsibility. This position among staff may reflect the organizational culture, which appears to be leader-oriented. It may also suggest that distributed leadership, which involves shared responsibility for implementing processes across the collective, is not yet fully developed. At the same time, the principal's approach can be interpreted as a sign of a mature leadership style.

Overall, the data collected provided the researcher with a broad understanding of how stakeholders perceive the process of international accreditation.

At the same time, despite the clarity of the stakeholders' responses, generalizing these findings regarding the school community's perception of accreditation is challenging due to the limited sample. Since the study involved only one school, it is difficult to assert that similar perceptions or communication issues exist in other private schools in Kazakhstan.

Nevertheless, the findings provide a foundation for developing recommendations that aim to enhance the transparency of accreditation processes, increase stakeholder engagement, and foster a shared understanding of the goals and objectives of accreditation. These aspects will be addressed in the concluding chapter, where the researcher will explore how strategically designed communication practices can support the successful pursuit of accreditation and strengthen the school's organizational culture.

### *Summary*

The aim of this chapter was to analyze and interpret the data collected through interviews with stakeholders of a private school in Kazakhstan, focusing on their perceptions of international accreditation.

The chapter began by discussing the findings related to key thematic categories, including the drivers for pursuing accreditation, its perceived advantages and drawbacks, and the main challenges encountered during the process. These categories were examined in conjunction with existing scholarly literature, which helped to situate each finding within a broader context.

Following this, the synthesis section demonstrated the extent to which the collected data addressed the research questions, while also acknowledging the study's limitations.

The findings and their interpretation presented in this chapter provide the foundation for the discussion in the following chapter, where the results of the interviews will be summarized, their practical significance explored, and recommendations formulated for schools undergoing international accreditation.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

### ***Outline***

In an era of global competition, the quality of education has become a national priority for most countries. One of the most widely adopted mechanisms for improving educational standards is external evaluation, particularly through the process of international institutional accreditation.

The growing popularity of this approach is evidenced by the rapid increase in the number of international schools worldwide. This trend is also observed in Kazakhstan, where an increasing number of schools, particularly private ones, strive to achieve the status of an internationally accredited institution. Achieving accreditation enables schools not only to meet high-quality standards but also to implement improvements in pedagogical practices, internal processes, and strategic management.

However, stakeholders' motivations for pursuing accreditation are not limited solely to aspirations for qualitative enhancements. As highlighted in the literature review, for school owners, accreditation can serve as a tool for strengthening market positioning, attracting students, and securing investments. For parents, accreditation represents an opportunity to expand their children's future prospects, primarily in terms of access to higher education abroad.

The effectiveness of such a complex process as international accreditation is unattainable without transparency, effective communication, and collective support from all members of the school community. Achieving this requires a thorough understanding of stakeholders' perceptions, levels of awareness, and degree of engagement in the accreditation process.

The aim of this study was to explore how different stakeholders in a private school in Kazakhstan perceive international accreditation, including their motivations, views on its advantages and drawbacks, the challenges encountered during the process, and the extent to which accreditation is understood within the school community as a mechanism for systematic improvement.

### ***Summary of the Key Findings***

First, the study revealed that stakeholders' perceptions of international accreditation vary significantly depending on their role within the school community. Most notably, parents demonstrated a limited understanding of accreditation, primarily associating it with their children's opportunities for admission to foreign universities, while remaining largely unaware of the broader benefits that accreditation can offer. This finding indicates a low level of parental engagement in the accreditation process. Follow-up interview questions confirmed parents' limited awareness and minimal involvement in discussions related to accreditation.

In terms of motivations, school owners perceive accreditation as a marketing tool, school leadership views it as a means for strategic development, teachers see it as an opportunity for professional growth. At the same time, parents regard it as a way to ensure their children's competitiveness.

Among the perceived advantages of accreditation, stakeholders highlighted improvements in educational quality, the development of professional communities, and the enhancement of school infrastructure. However, the interviews also identified certain drawbacks, such as the high financial burden associated with the process and the limited adaptability of international standards to the national context.

Stakeholders additionally outlined various challenges encountered during the accreditation process. School leadership emphasized the insufficient level of community awareness and a shortage of qualified staff. Teachers viewed accreditation as an additional

burden, citing a lack of time and resources. Moreover, stakeholders noted resistance to change and specific features of the school's organizational culture as further obstacles. The school principal also emphasized the challenges of adapting international standards that conflict with local traditions.

Another important finding was that the school community does not perceive accreditation as a process of systematic improvement but rather as an external inspection. This perception is attributed to the collective's lack of explanatory efforts. The key role and responsibility for shaping a proper understanding of accreditation, therefore, rest with the school's leadership.

### ***Contribution to Knowledge***

The value of this study lies in its exploration of stakeholders' perceptions of international accreditation within the context of secondary education, an area that has been previously underrepresented. The research covers a broad range of aspects, including stakeholders' motivations, perceived benefits, drawbacks, and challenges associated with the accreditation process, thereby offering a deeper understanding of the specific features of accreditation in the school sector.

Particularly valuable is the analysis of accreditation as a process of systematic improvement, an area that remains underrepresented in existing studies. While accreditation is often perceived merely as a formal assessment procedure, this study highlights its potential as a tool for the sustainable development of schools.

### ***Practical Implications***

In addition to its contribution to the academic body of knowledge, this study holds practical value for stakeholders involved in the international accreditation process, particularly school owners, leaders, working teams, and staff responsible for accreditation procedures. The findings provide deeper insights into the dynamics between various stakeholder groups during

this complex process, shedding light on their motivations, expectations, and barriers, ultimately contributing to more effective implementation.

Recognising that stakeholder groups may be driven by different motivations in pursuing accreditation, school leaders have the opportunity to tailor their engagement strategies accordingly and foster a shared understanding of accreditation goals. Recognizing these differences enables more effective dialogue with each group, reducing potential resistance and strengthening internal support for the process.

Another essential practical insight concerns the low level of parental involvement and limited understanding of accreditation among parents. This finding highlights the need to improve communication efforts with parents. For school leaders and teachers, this presents an opportunity to utilise the study's data to design effective communication strategies that enhance parental awareness and engagement in the accreditation process.

The study also found that stakeholders are generally well-informed about the benefits of international accreditation. This awareness can serve as a foundation for school administrators to explain the importance of accreditation to different groups. Emphasizing the benefits that matter most to each stakeholder category can help increase engagement and foster sustained support for the process.

The identified drawbacks of accreditation also have practical implications for school owners, leaders, and administrative staff. Understanding that the accreditation process involves significant financial costs allows schools to anticipate these expenditures and engage in long-term financial planning. This is particularly important during discussions between owners and school leaders when preparing for accreditation.

The issue of limited adaptability of international standards to local contexts is particularly relevant for school leaders and teaching teams. The findings suggest the need to develop strategies that adapt these standards in advance, taking into account cultural nuances,

local regulations, and traditions. Such an approach helps maintain balance, easing the implementation of standards and reducing the risk of resistance from the community.

The organizational challenges identified—such as staff overload, time constraints, a shortage of qualified specialists, and resistance to change—provide valuable insights for school teams. These findings point to the need for early resource allocation, preparation of necessary human resources, and work on organizational culture.

Another key practical insight relates to the perception of accreditation as a process of systematic improvement. This aspect can encourage school teams to reflect on the extent to which such a culture or value is embedded in their community, whether accreditation is viewed not as an external inspection but as an opportunity for sustainable development. The findings suggest that school leaders can coordinate their communication strategies early in the accreditation journey, focusing on clarifying the goals of accreditation and emphasizing the importance of systematic change. Such an approach can help shape a positive perception of accreditation within the school community and increase engagement among all participants.

Thus, the study underscores that effective communication is the cornerstone of successful international accreditation. All aspects of stakeholder perceptions are, in one way or another, linked to how the school organizes interaction and information exchange among its stakeholders. Establishing shared goals, transparency, and mutual understanding is fundamental to overcoming resistance, allocating resources effectively, and implementing standards successfully. For this reason, the findings of this study can serve as a foundation for school teams seeking to strengthen internal alignment and create the conditions necessary for a successful and meaningful accreditation process.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

Despite the valuable insights gained, this study has several limitations that were taken into account during the interpretation of its findings.

As the research was conducted within a single private school, the results reflect the specific characteristics of that particular context. Given the variations in political, economic, cultural, and regulatory environments, as well as differences in governance structures and stakeholder engagement levels across other schools, it isn't easy to fully generalize the findings to all private schools in Kazakhstan.

Furthermore, if a larger number of representatives from various stakeholder groups—such as teachers or parents—had participated in the study, it might have provided a broader and more nuanced perspective.

In addition, the potential influence of the researcher on the study process must be acknowledged. This aspect was thoroughly addressed in the Personal Positioning as a Researcher section of the first chapter. To minimize the impact of personal experience and beliefs on the research outcomes, the researcher strictly adhered to the described methodologies and procedures, maintained mindfulness during interviews by avoiding leading questions and refraining from steering respondents toward desired answers, and applied a reflective approach when analyzing and presenting the data, continuously checking for potential bias.

### ***Recommendations for Schools***

Based on the findings of this study, a number of practical steps can be recommended for stakeholders involved in the accreditation process.

Since the study revealed that stakeholder motivations for pursuing accreditation can vary significantly, schools are advised to:

- Conduct surveys among representatives of each stakeholder group to identify their expectations;
- Organize regular joint discussions on the goals of accreditation to foster a shared understanding of its significance.

Given that the research identified a low level of awareness and engagement among parents in the accreditation process, it is advisable to:

- Develop and distribute informational materials explaining the nature and benefits of accreditation;
- Hold meetings and informational sessions with the parent community;
- Consider including parents in advisory groups related to accreditation.

In view of the high financial burden associated with the process, it is recommended to:

- Allocate accreditation-related expenses (membership fees, expert visits, infrastructure upgrades) in the school budget well in advance;
- Conduct discussions with school owners to align on potential financial commitments.

To facilitate the adaptation of international accreditation standards to local educational environments, schools should:

- Proactively identify, within advisory working groups, the areas of school operations where difficulties in adapting international requirements may arise, and develop strategies to address them;
- Engage in dialogue with accreditation bodies regarding flexibility in interpreting specific standards.

Given the shortage of qualified specialists, schools are encouraged to:

- Conduct early audits of human resources to identify competency gaps;
- Provide professional development opportunities for staff in key areas related to accreditation standards.

Considering the challenges associated with staff workload and time constraints, it is recommended to:

- Distribute accreditation-related tasks and responsibilities evenly among staff, taking their primary workloads into account;

- Implement flexible work schedules that allow staff to allocate time for accreditation tasks without compromising their core duties;
- Consider temporary adjustments or optimization of teaching schedules during peak accreditation preparation periods.

To overcome the perception of accreditation as an external inspection, schools should:

- Throughout the accreditation process, engage in consistent informational and explanatory efforts that emphasize accreditation as a mechanism for sustainable development, using concrete examples of how applying standards can lead to systemic improvements.

Recognizing that the effectiveness of accreditation is closely tied to the quality of communication, it is recommended to:

- Develop a detailed preparation plan for each stage of accreditation, specifying responsible personnel, tasks, expected outcomes, and timelines;
- Form working groups comprising administrators and teachers for each domain of the accreditation framework;
- Regularly collect feedback to assess the level of awareness and engagement among all participants in the process.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

This study opens several avenues for future research. First, similar studies could be conducted to explore stakeholders' perceptions of international accreditation across multiple schools, providing a more representative picture that accounts for diverse school management models, cultural contexts, and regional conditions.

Additionally, comparative research could be undertaken—for example, comparing perceptions of accreditation between private and public schools, or between schools in different

Central Asian countries. Such studies could help identify both common trends and unique features of various educational systems in relation to international accreditation.

Finally, as highlighted by this study, the issue of adapting international standards to local educational contexts presents an interesting area for further investigation. Exploring best practices in this area could contribute to the development of more flexible and contextually relevant accreditation models.

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Throughout the research process, I gained invaluable experience not only in studying stakeholders' perceptions of accreditation but also in understanding my own role as a researcher and as a leader within an educational organization. The findings from the interviews once again highlighted for me the importance of effective communication within an organization during complex processes like accreditation.

As someone directly involved in accreditation processes, I recognized many of the study's findings in my daily interactions with stakeholders. This helped me reconsider how important it is to take into account the needs of all stakeholder groups in order to build effective engagement strategies and achieve shared goals.

This experience has enriched me not only as a researcher but also as an educational leader. It allowed me to look at school management processes from a new perspective, confirming that a key element of successfully undergoing accreditation is the development of a culture of shared responsibility and continuous improvement within the school community.

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## Appendix A: AI Declaration Form



Thesis Title:

## Declaration of the Use of Generative AI

I hereby declare that I have read and understood NUGSE's policy concerning appropriate use of AI and composed this work independently (please check one):

- ☒ with the use of artificial intelligence tools, or  
☐ without the use of artificial intelligence tools.

*(If you have used AI tools as defined in the GSE policy document, please complete the rest of this form.)*

During the preparation of this thesis/examination, I used ChatGPT [NAME of TOOL] to paraphrasing, brainstorming, translating [REASON]!

I also declare that I

- ☐ am aware of the capabilities and limitations of AI tool(s),  
☐ have verified that the content generated by AI systems and adopted by me is factually correct,  
☐ am aware that as the author of this thesis I bear full responsibility for the statements and assertions made in it,  
☐ have submitted complete and accurate information about my use of AI tools in this work, and  
☐ acknowledge that there may be disciplinary consequences if I have not followed NUGSE's guidelines regarding appropriate AI use.

Name: Daniyar Sutzhanov  
 Date:

Signature:

## Appendix B: Informed Consent Letters

### INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

#### (INTERVIEW)

#### **The Stakeholders' Perceptions of International Accreditation in Private Schools in Astana**

#### **To Private School Principal/Vice-principal**

##### **DESCRIPTION:**

You are kindly invited to participate in **a research study** that aims to explore school stakeholders' perceptions of international accreditation in a private school of Astana, Kazakhstan. The purpose of my research is to explore and understand the perceptions of various school stakeholders (principals, vice principals, teachers, and parents) regarding the motivations, challenges, and benefits of pursuing international accreditation.

I would like to request you to participate in a one-on-one interview which will be held in November-December, 2024.

The interview data and time will be negotiated and agreed with you. The interview will be recorded with your permission.

Your anonymity and confidentiality will be protected, since the pseudonyms will be used. The recorded interviews will be deleted after transcribing the interviews. During the analysis process only the supervisor and the researcher will have access to the data. As the process of interviewing starts you will have an opportunity not to answer any of the questions that you will find not appropriate.

**TIME INVOLVEMENT:** Your participation will take approximately 60 minutes.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** The risks associated with this study are minimal. However, despite the use of pseudonyms, given that only one school is participating as the research site, it is possible that staff members from the school or other people may recognize or infer that specific responses in the interview may be attributed to you. The benefits expected from this study include a better understanding of stakeholders' perceptions of international accreditation in private schools, which can inform future educational policy.

**PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS:** Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose not to answer any questions that you may feel uncomfortable. You can also check your interview transcript if you would like to. The results of this research study may be presented at academic conferences or published in scientific journals, but your identity will remain confidential.

**CONTACTING INFORMATION:** Questions: If you have any questions about this research, please contact me via phone number +7776 006 77 55. If you have any concerns, or complaints about this research please contact my Master's Thesis Supervisor, Dr. Duishon Shamatov, via email: [duishonkul.shamatov@nu.edu.kz](mailto:duishonkul.shamatov@nu.edu.kz) and phone number +7 705 636 3284.

Independent Contact: If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or

if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE Research Committee to speak to someone independent of the research team at +7 7172 709359. You can also write an email to the NUGSE Research Committee at [gse\\_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz](mailto:gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz)

Please sign this consent form if you agree to participate in this study.

- I have carefully read the information provided;
- I have been given full information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study;
- I understand how the data collected will be used, and that any confidential information will be seen only by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason;
- With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.
- 

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C: Recruitment Letters by Email**

### **Recruitment Letter**

Dear [School Principal's Name],

I am planning to conduct a research study on the perceptions of private school stakeholders regarding international accreditation. This study aims to explore the views of stakeholders at a private school in Astana, Kazakhstan, on the following topics: the main drivers and motivations for obtaining international accreditation, its drawbacks, strengths, challenges faced during the accreditation process, and its consideration as a continuous improvement process for school operations.

As part of this research, I intend to conduct interviews with relevant stakeholders to explore their perceptions of international accreditation.

In this regard, I kindly ask you to share this information with the staff at your school for their awareness, and, should they be interested, to request that they contact me by phone at +77760067755 or via email at [daniyar.sutzhhanov@nu.edu.kz](mailto:daniyar.sutzhhanov@nu.edu.kz).

The opinions and experiences of your school's staff will be of great importance and value to my research.

Sincerely,  
Daniyar Sutzhhanov

### **Сұраныс хаты:**

#### **Құрметті мектеп директоры...,**

Мен халықаралық аккредиттеу жекеменшік мектептерінің стейкхолдерлерінің түсініктерін зерттеуді жоспарлап отырмын. Бұл зерттеу Астана қаласындағы (Қазақстан) жекеменшік мектептің стейкхолдерлерінің халықаралық аккредиттеуді келесі мәселелерге байланысты қабылдауын зерттеуге бағытталған: халықаралық аккредиттеуді алудың негізгі драйверлері/мотивтері, оның кемшіліктері, күшті жақтары, аккредиттеуден өту кезінде стейкхолдерлер кездесетін күрделіліктер, сондай-ақ аккредиттеуді мектеп қызметін үздіксіз жетілдіру процесі ретінде қарастыру.

Осы зерттеу аясында Мен мүдделі тараптармен олардың халықаралық аккредиттеу туралы түсініктерін зерттеу үшін сұхбат жүргізуді жоспарлап отырмын.

Осыған байланысты Сізден осы ақпаратты сіздің мектебіңіздің қызметкерлеріне мәлімет үшін беруіңізді сұраймын және олардың тарапынан +77760067755 нөмірі бойынша немесе электрондық пошта арқылы хабарласуыңызды сұраймын [daniyar.sutzhhanov@nu.edu.kz](mailto:daniyar.sutzhhanov@nu.edu.kz)

Сіздің мектеп қызметкерлерінің пікірлері мен тәжірибесі менің зерттеуім үшін өте маңызды болады.

**Құрметпен, Данияр Сутжанов**

**Письмо-запрос:**

Уважаемый директор школы...,

Я планирую провести исследование восприятий стейкхолдеров частных школ международной аккредитации. Данное исследование направлено на изучение восприятия стейкхолдерами частной школы в г. Астане (Казахстан) международной аккредитации, связанного со следующими вопросами: основные драйверы/мотивы получения международной аккредитации, ее недостатки, сильные стороны, сложности, с которыми сталкиваются стейкхолдеры при прохождении аккредитации, а также рассмотрение аккредитации как процесса непрерывного совершенствования деятельности школы.

В рамках данного исследования я планирую провести интервью с заинтересованными сторонами, чтобы изучить их восприятия касательно международной аккредитации.

В связи с этим прошу Вас передать для сведения данную информацию сотрудникам вашей школы, и в случае заинтересованности с их стороны попросить связаться со мной по номеру +77760067755 или по электронной почте [daniyar.sutzhanov@nu.edu.kz](mailto:daniyar.sutzhanov@nu.edu.kz)

Мнения и опыт сотрудников Вашей школы будут чрезвычайно важны ценны для моего исследования.

Суважением,  
Данияр Сутжанов

## **Appendix D: Interview Protocol**

### **Interview Protocol (with a parent)**

**Research Topic:** Perceptions of International Accreditation by Private School Stakeholders

**Date of the Interview:**

**Location of the Interview:**

**Interviewer:** Daniyar Sutzhanov

**Interviewee:**

**Position of the Interviewee:**

This study aims to explore the perceptions of stakeholders at a private school in Astana, Kazakhstan, regarding international accreditation. The research focuses on the following aspects: the main drivers for obtaining international accreditation, its drawbacks, strengths, challenges faced by stakeholders during the accreditation process, and the consideration of accreditation as a process of continuous school improvement. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. As mentioned in the informed consent form and discussed earlier, the interview will be recorded using an audio device, and all recordings will be destroyed after they are transcribed and anonymized. Do you agree to the audio recording? The recording is for data analysis purposes only. The collected information will be used in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. I would like to remind you that your participation in the interview is voluntary.

**Questions:**

1. Please briefly tell me about yourself. How long has your child been studying at this school?
2. Which field do you work in, if it's not confidential?
3. Are you familiar with the concept of "international accreditation" for schools?
4. Do you have any experience with international accreditation as a parent of a student?  
Could you tell me more about this experience? What is your contribution to the accreditation process at this school?
5. When enrolling your child in an internationally accredited school, what is your primary goal? What aspect is most important to you?
6. What opportunities does international accreditation open up for you and your children?

I would like to express my deep gratitude once again for your time.

### **Протокол интервью (с родителем учащегося)**

**Тема исследования:** Восприятия международной аккредитации стейкхолдерами частной школы

**Дата проведения интервью:**

**Место проведения интервью:**

**Опрашивающий:** Данияр Сутжанов

**Интервьюируемый:**

**Должность интервьюируемого:**

Данное исследование направлено на изучение восприятия стейкхолдерами частной школы в г. Астане (Казахстан) международной аккредитации, связанного со следующими вопросами: основные драйверы/мотивы получения международной аккредитации, ее недостатки, сильные стороны, сложности, с которыми сталкиваются стейкхолдеры при прохождении аккредитации, а также рассмотрение аккредитации как процесса непрерывного совершенствования деятельности школы. Интервью будет длиться около 60 минут. Как упоминалось в форме информированного согласия и обсуждалось ранее, интервью будет записано с использованием аудиоустройства, и все записи будут уничтожены после того, как они будут расшифрованы и обезличены. Вы согласны на аудиозапись? Запись делается только в целях дальнейшего анализа данных. Собранная информация будет использоваться таким образом, чтобы вас невозможно было идентифицировать. Напоминаю о том, что ваше участие в интервью является добровольным.

#### **Вопросы.**

1. Расскажите вкратце пожалуйста о себе. Как долго ваш ребенок учится в данной школе?
2. Какую сферу деятельности вы представляете, если это не секрет?
3. Знакомо ли вам понятие “международная аккредитация” школ?
4. Есть ли у вас опыт работы с международной аккредитацией в качестве родителя учащегося? Можете рассказать об этом опыте подробнее? Какой ваш вклад в процесс аккредитации в данной школе?
5. Отдавая ребенка в международно аккредитованную школу, какую цель вы преследуете прежде всего? Какой для вас самый важный аспект?

6. Какие возможности открывает перед вами, перед вашими детьми международная аккредитация?

Выражаю ваш еще раз глубокую признательность за уделенное время.

## **Appendix E: Transcript of the Interview and Coding Example**

*How do you understand international accreditation?*

To begin with, I would like to share my personal understanding of the process of international accreditation. In my view, this is a process of evaluating an educational institution in accordance with international standards—specifically, high standards of international education. Typically, this process includes an assessment of educational programs, the school's infrastructure, governance, as well as the various educational practices implemented within the school.

*Have you participated in the accreditation process? If so, in what capacity?*

I have personally been involved in the process of international accreditation in all schools where I have previously worked. My responsibilities included compiling documentation and contributing to the modification of internal processes to ensure alignment with the high standards of international accreditation. Additionally, I was involved in preparing reports that were submitted to the accreditation bodies to demonstrate compliance with the required standards. My role also included collaborating with colleagues to discuss the standards and principles adopted by our school.

*Why do you think schools pursue international accreditation?*

In my opinion, one of the main reasons why private schools pursue international accreditation is to enhance their competitiveness in the educational market. Currently, the market in Kazakhstan includes both public and private sector organizations. Achieving international accreditation allows a school to secure a significant position in this competitive landscape. I believe this is particularly important for school founders and owners, as market competitiveness and alignment with international accreditation standards help create a unique educational product that attracts a large number of clients—namely, students and their parents.

As for school leadership and teachers, this process helps to improve the quality of education provided by the school. During preparation for accreditation, the school has an opportunity to enhance educational programs, teaching quality, and instructional methods and strategies used by teachers. Furthermore, issues that might not have been previously discussed at the school level—such as infrastructure development—are brought to the forefront. With global trends and the growing emphasis on inclusive education, many schools are shifting toward promoting inclusion, which in turn influences the development of necessary infrastructure and resources to support students with special educational needs.

Regarding parents and students, I believe their interest in international accreditation is tied to the school's performance indicators. In the future, students will likely transfer between schools or pursue higher education, and having an internationally accredited school on their record improves their prospects and the school's ranking among similar institutions, both in Kazakhstan and abroad.

To summarize, I would say that international accreditation positively impacts all stakeholders, including shareholders, school employees, and clients—students and their parents. Each group has its own objectives, which may be commercial or educational, but they share a common interest in quality education and future opportunities.

*What motivates you to work at an internationally accredited school?*

For me, the primary motivation to work at an internationally accredited school lies in the elevated reputation and quality of educational services that such accreditation signifies. This, in turn, generates interest among students and parents, encouraging them to choose such a school. Nowadays, there are many schools on the market, each trying to differentiate itself through unique educational programs or teaching methods. International accreditation enhances the school's appeal and demand among families.

Higher demand for enrollment also leads to a more selective admission process. As a result, the likelihood increases that the school will attract students with strong academic backgrounds and higher performance levels, creating a community of motivated learners.

Additionally, I appreciate that accreditation fosters school development. It ensures that the school continuously evolves, not remaining stagnant. This growth extends beyond teaching and learning to include the well-being of staff, students, and parents, as well as the overall school community. It is important for me that the school I work in keeps pace with modern trends, consistently improving its practices and programs.

Another significant factor is the prestige associated with working at an accredited school. Like any teacher, I prefer to work in a competitive environment with a solid reputation. Having this experience on my resume, especially when applying for future positions, signals to potential employers that I have worked within a structured system aligned with international standards. It reflects my familiarity with effective educational practices and the ability to contribute positively to new settings. This valuable experience is something I can bring with me to future roles.

*What are the drawbacks or challenges of the accreditation process?*

As with any process, international accreditation comes with certain challenges. The first issue that comes to mind is the financial burden associated with improving school facilities, particularly for promoting inclusive education. In some schools, this work begins from scratch, requiring significant investments in infrastructure and equipment to support students with special educational needs.

Financial challenges also arise from the need to revise educational programs and practices. Updating curricula, training teachers, and developing policies all require financial resources. I assume that these costs might cause some schools to delay or hesitate in pursuing accreditation, despite the long-term benefits it offers.

Moreover, accreditation requires schools to commit to ongoing development, with re-accreditation cycles occurring every three to five years. Membership in international accreditation bodies is a commercial arrangement, requiring annual fees to maintain the school's status and reputation. This commitment to continuous improvement—updating programs and training staff—can be challenging for some schools.

Another drawback I perceive is the occasional misalignment between international accreditation standards and the local educational context. Accreditation bodies need to consider national education policies and cultural contexts. Sometimes, it is difficult to implement or justify compliance with certain standards because the definitions or approaches may differ in Kazakhstan.

*What challenges do teachers face in the accreditation process?*

Teachers, in particular, experience resistance to the changes brought by accreditation. Adjusting teaching methods, revising programs, and adopting new strategies can be overwhelming. Some educators are not fully prepared for these shifts. There is also a noticeable demotivation due to the increased workload associated with accreditation. Teachers are required to handle documentation, engage with parents and students, and integrate accreditation tasks into their regular teaching duties, which can lead to burnout.

While the benefits of accreditation—such as school growth and enhanced reputation—are clear, they often become overshadowed among teachers by the fear of additional responsibilities. This fear can diminish the perceived value of the accreditation process within the teaching staff.

*Do you see accreditation as a process of continuous improvement?*

I believe that only a limited number of teachers within the school community understand that accreditation is not a one-time evaluation but a continuous process of development. Many view it as an external inspection, after which a final decision is made—

either the school meets the standards or it does not. This perception, perhaps rooted in post-Soviet educational traditions, treats accreditation as a pass/fail assessment rather than a tool for ongoing growth.

To shift this mindset, I believe efforts must begin at the leadership level. Founders and school administrators need to fully embrace accreditation as a continuous improvement mechanism. If the leadership views accreditation merely as a box-ticking exercise to gain membership and then forgets about it, the same attitude will trickle down to teachers and staff.

In my previous schools, I observed that when the administration genuinely saw accreditation as a means for sustained development and clearly communicated this to the staff, it positively influenced teachers' understanding of the process. Therefore, leadership plays a critical role in shaping perceptions about accreditation and fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

| <b>Quote from Interview</b>                                                                                                                                      | <b>Code</b>                     | <b>Category</b>                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| "In my opinion, one of the main reasons why private schools pursue international accreditation is to enhance their competitiveness in the educational market..." | Market competitiveness          | Motivation of stakeholders              |
| "I have personally been involved in the process of international accreditation in all three schools where I have previously worked..."                           | Teacher involvement             | Accreditation process experience        |
| "Financial challenges also arise from the need to revise educational programs and practices..."                                                                  | Financial burden                | Drawbacks of accreditation              |
| "Teachers experience resistance to the changes brought by accreditation... there is noticeable demotivation due to the increased workload..."                    | Teacher resistance and workload | Challenges in the accreditation process |
| "I believe that only a limited number of teachers understand that accreditation is not a one-time evaluation but a continuous process of development..."         | Perception of accreditation     | Accreditation as continuous improvement |