

Quality assurance framework: the quest for quality education in Kazakhstan and the importance of student voices

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Given the increasingly growing interest in quality-oriented education across the world, many higher education institutions have been adopting new practices in the quality assessment of their educational services. In view of these developments, this paper provides an overview of quality assurance (QA) systems in higher education that follow the mechanisms and approaches within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It primarily explores the main concepts underlying the quality assurance framework in today's context. Furthermore, the paper turns its focus to the Kazakhstani quality assurance framework that has experienced substantial changes since its integration into the EHEA in 2010. In the concluding section, student participation in and contributions to the QA processes, given the roles of collaborators and experts, are discussed.

Keywords: quality culture, quality assurance framework, EHEA, accrediting agencies, internal and external quality assurance, higher education institutions, student roles.

Introduction

In the past decade, educational reforms have displayed an upsurge of interest in higher education. Promoting quality education has become a high priority issue in academia, as well as in policy-making units. There are many underlying reasons and precedents as to why quality education is of utmost importance in the Kazakhstani context. One of these reasons is the goal related to increasing prestige to become both competitive and attractive within the global network of higher education. Globally, by 2025, there will be an increase in the number of students who enroll in tertiary educational institutions. The expected figure is 263 million students, up from 100 million students in 2000 (Karaim, 2011). If we consider the dynamic nature of today's world, internationalization in education (Ferreira, Vidal, & Vieira, 2014) has given rise to the inbound and outbound mobility of students, which poses multi-dimensional challenges for higher education. Thus, higher education institutions (HEIs) urgently need to meet the expectations of students to obtain quality education and recognize their academic documents within and beyond their geographical boundaries.

In order to address the growing need for quality education (UN, 2015) in the Kazakhstani higher educational system, rigorous changes have taken place (MoES, 2011). Since 2010, when Kazakhstan became a member-country of the Bologna Process, large-scale reforms have met with concepts that are currently in vogue, namely, accountability and transparency in strategic development documents and action plans. According to the State program for 2011-2020, world-level education is achievable given the fact that Kazakhstan is now integrated into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), despite its low-level competitiveness in the education sector. Since the concept of quality in higher education has been placed at the forefront in state-wide documents, it is clearly articulated that quality education aligned with international best practices is to be reached by 2020 (MoES, 2011). This will satisfy the requirements of labor markets and industrial-development plans, and of the "person" (MoES, 2010). To an onlooker, the use of the word 'person' appearing in quotes may breed confusion. To clarify, this word encompasses different stakeholders, such as students, academic staff, parents, employers, and managerial bodies, who have high expectations of quality services in education. Holistically, these actors are regarded as the recipients of trustworthy and quality-oriented education.

When considering how to ensure quality and build trust in education, it is worth providing insights on how scholars and stakeholders perceive and interpret the concept in a broader sense. This is further accompanied by information on how the reform of quality assurance has been undertaken in the Kazakhstani higher educational landscape and the challenges encountered in the quest for quality assurance mechanisms. As students are the most direct beneficiaries of higher education and can be considered "clients for quality assessment" (ENQA, 2013), their participation and contributions are addressed giving students the roles of collaborators and experts in the quality assurance framework.

Concepts within the quality assurance framework

It is of utmost importance to define the distinctive concepts of “quality,” “quality assurance,” “internal quality culture,” and “accreditation,” which are critical to understanding quality education. In the backdrop of ongoing reforms in higher education, quality education remains a murky term for most people who are exposed to the process of quality assurance. The perspectives of these concepts vary from one interpretation to another. First, if we traverse to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), “quality” is “mainly a result of the interaction between teachers, students, and the institutional learning environment” (Dent, Lane, & Strike, 2017, p.108). In common parlance, Ishikawa (1996) claims that “quality begins with education and ends with education” (as cited in Paraschivescu, 2017, p.19). Thus, excellence in education can be provided if quality becomes the indispensable source of real educational initiatives and practices. In other words, it should be at the forefront of education from the outset. Second, the framework of quality assurance has been introduced to stimulate and spread quality education. The term “quality assurance” is a generic term for all activities in *Verbesserungsprozessen*, i.e., continual improvement processes (ESG, 2015). Improving quality through the quality assurance framework best operates if institutions and involved stakeholders maintain an internal quality culture. It may be described as “organizational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently” and can be characterized by common values and commitments of stakeholders towards quality (EUA, 2006, p.10). As noted by Yingqiang and Yongjian (2016), HEIs and their academic communities have the responsibility “to define quality based on its own history, mission, goals, location, and environment” by creating an organic contextual approach (p.16). To support this, Katiliute and Neverauskas (2009) believe that “a university with a culture of quality can be defined as an organization that has clear values and beliefs that promote total behavior in favor of quality” (p.1072). In line with the quality culture, there emerges a mutually beneficial connection between actors bringing quality and recipients using educational services. As the term “quality assurance” implies, systemic relations within the QA process naturally present the interests of existing and emerging groups inside the system to render it more transparent and publicly reliable.

In addition, the concepts of internal and external quality assurance are practical mechanisms of the QA process. Within each academic community, there are special divisions that reflect on HEIs’ educational activities through certain internal quality assurance or control mechanisms. In fact, the process of internal quality assurance is carried out by examining *de facto* conditions in the learning environments of institutions. Generally, institutional outcomes may be presented in self-assessment reports through the use of measurement criteria and tools for self-analysis. In this vein, external quality assurance is of utmost importance to inform the public about the current situation of quality education delivered by academia. The whole process examines HEIs’ compliance with prescribed standards and guidelines, which later grants official consent to the institution to continue its educational activities. All external quality assurance activities are undertaken through an accreditation process with the two-fold purposes of enhancement and excellence in higher education. According to a CHEA (2014) report, accreditation is “a review of the quality of higher education institutions and programs” that is assured by accrediting agencies (para.1). Accrediting agencies independently organize accreditation by relying on the common framework of the QA and its quality assessment standards and guidelines.

The effectiveness of QA agencies in higher education are under scrutiny, since the quality assurance frameworks and services differ from one agency to another (Ryan, 2015). Even though the QA process seems complex and multidimensional, it is, nonetheless, an overarching practice in the sphere whereby quality education is ensured. In the course of defining key concepts, one should attempt to interpret them precisely in relation to the specific attributes of higher education. These global concepts in the quality assurance system have been adopted to the Kazakhstani educational system, and this has influenced the more current educational reforms in the country.

Quality assurance framework in Kazakhstan

In the past decade, the Kazakhstani higher educational system has adopted new practices and frameworks to ensure the quality of its education. Prior to 2000, there was a nation-wide system of quality control that was performed by governmental or ministerial committees (Kerimkulova & Kuzhabekova, 2017). In the analytic report *National System and Educational Standards of Higher Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan* (2009), the state control of higher education included the processes of state licensing, state attestation (cancelled since 2017) and the Intermediate Government Control Test of senior students’ academic performance. Subsequently, the quality assurance framework was adopted in 2007 when the Law on Education (2007) document included a chapter devoted to the national quality assurance framework and issues of state control and accreditation (as cited in Kalanova & Omirbayev, 2009).

From then on, ensuring the quality of education has been a top priority. Based on this premise, joining the EHEA and signing the Bologna Declaration in 2010 tremendously impacted the creation of first-order changes (MoES, 2010). Due to this membership, the higher educational system has accepted the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), which are the common mechanisms for quality assurance. State quality control and its formerly rigid procedures have been “softened” since the EHEA stated its mission to shape the higher educational landscape jointly with governments, HEIs, and stakeholders (Paris Communiqué, 2018). In the aftermath of Kazakhstan’s membership to the Bologna process, local policymakers developed the State Program of Education Development for 2011-2020, which clearly identified the goals and objectives of the quality assurance system to be implemented by 2020. Namely, the quality assurance mechanisms have been introduced to encourage the HEIs to pass accreditation via the accrediting agencies that are included in the National Register of Accreditation Agencies.

Today, Kazakhstani higher education is in the process of adapting to new academic challenges which, in turn, boost the quality culture and prestige of HEIs. Since the public-private dualistic nature of HEIs has become a focus of attention in defining the local and global status of higher education (Grifoll, 2016), giving academic freedom to the HEIs and passing independent external QA processes are key pillars in implementing the strategic targets by 2020.

As the process of quality assurance is voluntarily performed in the U.S and Europe, providing a legal framework for its implementation has been a major step towards the development of the higher education system in Kazakhstan. Since 2012, the Kazakhstani quality assurance framework has been carried out by the non-governmental and independent organizations that we earlier conceptualized as “accrediting (accreditation) agencies”. In retrospect, there were two national independent accrediting agencies: Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating (IAAR) and Independent Kazakh Agency for Quality Assurance (IQAA) (Kalanova, 2013). These agencies have developed and regularly updated their own standards and guidelines to the strategic development plans, and all stakeholders can access information related to these past-to-present internal and external activities within the national quality assurance system. According to their official documents, there exist two stages of accreditation: (1) institutional accreditation for the purpose of meeting quality standards in areas such as student services, administration, strategic planning, and financial well-being; (2) specialized accreditation targeting the assessment of learning inputs, curriculum design and the performance of the academic staff (ESG, 2015). By successfully fulfilling the necessary conditions to reach these accreditation stages, HEIs in Kazakhstan receive financial aid from the government for the funding of academic activities and research development. It is expected that 65% of all HEIs will pass through these two agencies for national accreditation in compliance with international standards by 2020 (MoES, 2010). As of 2018, the number of Kazakhstani accrediting agencies has increased to five, including KAZSEE, ARQA, and ECAQA, which have been added to the list of the two previously mentioned ones and, accordingly, 105 local universities passed the accreditation process in 2018. This amounts to 85% of the total number of universities (MoES, 2018).

Building on the latest modifications reflected in the state education program for 2020-2025, an updated system of quality education has been developed with the goal of creating academic excellence centers within 10 existing local universities. In addition, these 10 universities along with other institutions are required to update the content of their study programs and are now allowed to accept independent certification for student enrollment such as GMAT, SAT, SBT, and GRE (MoES, 2019).

Along with the five national agencies, international quality assurance agencies operate towards building a quality culture and promoting world-class recognition of Kazakhstani HEIs. According to the Strategic Plan of the MoES RK for 2017-2021, the National Register of Accreditation Agency has acknowledged the provision of accreditation by eight international accrediting agencies from Germany, Austria, the USA, and the UK to some local Kazakhstani universities (MoES, 2016). A culture of openness in relation to international agencies has enhanced the overall prestige of Kazakhstani HE. In this regard, eight Kazakhstani HEIs are ranked in Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World Ranking System (MoES, 2016). To a greater extent, HEIs are involved in the competitive arena where quality education is an indicator of recognition at both regional and international levels. Irrespective of lasting reforms, the Kazakhstani QA framework has been established owing to the steady changes in higher education.

Student perspectives: defining roles of students in quality assurance framework

Students are the immediate beneficiaries of quality education. Generally, the status of students is described as “clients for quality assessment” (ENQA, 2013). The involvement of students into the QA process deepens the awareness of hidden shortcomings and offers new solutions to existing problems in the education process. From a holistic view, the participation and contribution of students in the QA framework (Elassy, 2013; Mirică & Abdulamit, 2014; Paraschivescu, 2017) should be expanded by defining student roles as those of collaborators and experts¹.

The role of students-as-collaborators is being widely introduced in higher education. Referring to the Bologna Process, as per the outcomes of the Leuven Communiqué in 2009, student-centered learning (SCL) has become a hallmark of higher education (ESU, 2010). This approach is focused on the needs and expectations of students instead of having only teacher-centered scenarios in the classroom. Several practices are being undertaken in forms of “design and flexibility of curriculum, course content, and interactivity of the learning process” (ENQA, 2009, para 1). These activities can empower the students to actively engage in educational processes.

The new SCL approach has grown in popularity within all possible academic discourses. Statements such as “students are allies in the teaching and learning process” can still be heard in the inaugural speeches of educators and academics. Policy documents have also raised the voices of students within the education process. However, there is scarce evidence on how these changes are tangible in real-life settings. The participation of students as collaborators is actually neglected in the QA processes (Fedeli et al., 2019). Considering students as insiders would provide a good opportunity for them to invest their time and energy in a productive way to get an interactive and hands on experience in ensuring quality-oriented education. Through their collaboration with fellow students and academic personnel, it is highly possible that new insightful propositions related to maintaining quality education may arise. These propositions should be recorded at both an academic and institutional level. Academics and students involved in the teaching-learning continuum need to work collaboratively, for example, identifying strengths and weaknesses and finding solutions for course efficacy.

However, the full picture is inconsistent with reality. Currently, the common approach is to use reflective tools to obtain more valuable information on provided educational services. It is believed that student satisfaction with the academic environment and instruction serve as a powerful instrument in internal quality assurance. In contrast to this, these course satisfaction tests may fail because of inaccessible information on what subsequent activities have taken place. Information, both at entry and exit levels, should be further disseminated to students. From the perspective of internal quality assurance, the collaborative role of students needs to be defined if the institution is in the pursuit of high-quality education. Consequently, these mutually accepted and visible changes become palpable and omnipresent at an institutional level.

Involving students as experts in the QA framework is regularly practiced. In the 2018 issue of the annual project “Bologna with Student Eyes”, it was highlighted that students want to be a part of “governance, decision-making, and improvements, but their roles have to be meaningful” (p.9). To some extent, this is fulfilled by introducing the participation of student representatives in external quality assurance panels. Independent QA agencies involve students as experts in accreditation procedures. According to Ryan (2015), student representatives see the situation from a learner's perspective, which other stakeholders (academic community, employers, and even taxpayers) may not take into consideration. However, not all students become experts in the QA framework. Only students who actively participate in the academic and social life of the institution may be selected as student experts. To define the outcomes of involving students as experts, two types of benefits can be categorized: benefits to the student and benefits to the QA process (Elassy, 2013). Students develop their analytical and leadership skills from participating in an expert panel of other stakeholders. Benefits for the QA framework include transparency and new perspectives in the activity of QA agencies.

In the meantime, the involvement of students in QA processes has presented a challenge to the legitimacy of student experts (Alaniska et al., 2006). In the eyes of academic personnel, students may not be properly regarded as qualified experts with the necessary competencies. To increase a student's legitimacy, their role as expert should be defined not only by QA agencies, but also by faculty or institutional boards. Students themselves may organize

student expert unions to gauge the educational situation in the institution, both at micro and macro levels. However, there emerges another challenge that points to the lack of knowledge of student responsibilities to the internal process of quality management.

Student-run quality assurance units in HEIs may organize activities, namely, satisfaction level surveys (self-designed), reflective reports on internal academic changes, and meetings to discuss institutional support services for students (adapted from Alaniska et al., 2006; Belash et al., 2015; Paraschivescu, 2017). These activities then provide the impetus for developing a student quality culture and building their confidence in taking responsibilities for quality education. Students' participation in the QA processes is inevitable and highly necessary. Their perspectives contribute valuable insights into the promotion of quality education, defining their roles as collaborators and experts. The Norwegian and Finnish systems are successful examples of the involvement of students into the QA processes by organizing training programs on how to become competent experts (Alaniska et al., 2006). These roles are not part of a definitive set and are subject to change depending on the dynamic nature of the educational landscape. Undeniably, students would be able to reveal that, through their participation and contribution to the QA processes, they could influence the institutional trajectory in the quest for quality-oriented education.

Concluding remarks

Quality is a sought-after characteristic in the higher educational landscape. Promoting quality education is included in the agenda of institutions, educational organizations, and state documents on educational development. Based on the present-day educational context, educational excellence should be ensured and promoted within a common quality assurance framework that suits any specific context. Regarding the key goal of the QA framework, the ultimate result is to increase the internal quality culture both inside and outside of the academic community. Furthermore, there are core concepts which underscore the very nature of developing quality education and making the process accessible and transparent.

The point is that there are different rationales for the QA framework and its mechanisms. As the paper generally deals with the QA framework in the Kazakhstani context, almost all QA mechanisms and approaches are transmitted by the European Higher Education Area. Within it, more attention is given to the stakeholders who also have diverse expectations and roles in the higher education system. Needless to say, as the students are immediate beneficiaries of quality education, their positions and interests should be defined by an emerging student-centered learning approach with respect to the common QA standards and guidelines. In the quest for quality education, creating a space for student-initiated practices in the QA process may bring substantial changes, which will take the institutional quality mission to a higher level. Therefore, higher education institutions should seek effective ways in which they can enhance internal quality culture and provide opportunities for students to become part of this process.

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Footnote

1. The author also draws on her experience of being a student herself, and her past experience as a student expert in the institutional accreditation organized by IQAA