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STATE REGULATION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN

Abstract. This paper intends to examine the concept of quality assurance and the role of the government in this process and highlights some discourses based on the case study of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan inherited the highly centralized Soviet system regulating the education sphere, which still has some implications for the development of a national model of quality assurance. Kazakhstan has developed the system, which includes three stages of quality assurance: internal and external quality assurance systems and state regulation. The paper's basic argument is that the issue of quality assurance management needs to be critically reconsidered. The paper uses a literature-based analysis to explore the politics of knowledge production in the field of quality assurance and suggests some of the issues that need further research in the area.

Keywords: quality assurance, higher education, state regulation

Introduction

The shift from an elite to a mass system in higher education has raised questions about the quality of education and its control [1]. Many argue that the expansion of higher education has led to the loss of quality. This has led to a burgeoning of research on the development of quality assurance in higher education. Saarinen states that “quality has turned from a debatable and controversial concept to an everyday issue in higher education” [2, p. 55]. The quality assurance process was initially introduced as a regulatory tool rather than a checking and controlling system. The main issue here is whether quality assurance promotes self-development and accountability of all stakeholders. This issue will be analyzed in this paper in the post-Soviet context of Kazakhstan.

Quality assurance policy in higher education in Kazakhstan has been implemented as part of the “Europeanization” [3, p. 2], which led to the discourse between the centralized old system and the new liberal approach. In line with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG), Kazakhstan has developed a national quality assurance model in higher education. However, in this process, the government perceives its role as establishing a system providing high-quality education rather than as promoting its quality.

The purpose of this article is to explore the policy of quality assurance in higher education and evaluate the role of the state in this process. Exploring this research topic raises questions such as:

- How has a policy “moving from quality control to quality improvement” been implemented in Kazakhstan and what is the role of the state?

- What are the main discourses in the development of a national model of quality assurance in higher education in Kazakhstan?

The main argument of this article is that despite some positive trends in quality assurance policy in the Kazakhstani higher education system, the state has remained the dominant actor with colossal power, regulating it through various legislative documents and procedures.

This article consists of four chapters. Following this introduction, the paper will explain the research methods employed in this study. Consequently, a comprehensive literature review will be provided, primarily examining the concept of quality assurance in higher education and the role of the state in this process. After that, the paper will focus on the case of the quality

assurance policy in Kazakhstan, highlighting key challenges. In conclusion, the study's main findings will be summarized and accompanied by recommendations for future research in this area.

Research methodology and methods

The study uses qualitative research, which allows finding answers to the above-mentioned questions, in deeply exploring the development of quality assurance policy and analyzing obstacles and perspectives. This study is literature-based. Related literature in Kazakh, Russian, and English will be examined, which can facilitate conducting research thoroughly and systematically.

Official state documents, legislative acts, and reports of international organizations, such as the European Union, will also be examined. Critical discourse analysis of policy text, namely some chapters of the Law “On Education” of the Republic of Kazakhstan, regulating the quality assurance process in higher education, will be conducted in order to understand the national policy in-depth. The focus will be on the language of policy texts and how it might be interpreted in practice.

Results and discussion

The state regulation of quality assurance in higher education

According to Jarvis, the quality assurance process in the higher education system was initially formed in the late 19th century, when the first accreditation agencies appeared in the United States [4]. However, only from the late 1960s, this notion has become a focal point in academic life due to the massification of higher education.

The notion of quality assurance might be perceived differently by different stakeholders. According to the Analytic Quality Glossary, quality assurance is “the collections of policies, procedures, systems and practices internal or external to the organisation designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality” [5, p. 97].

Policy-makers may see quality assurance as ensuring compliance of higher education to the stated standards. Harvey and Newton state that “Quality assurance of higher education is ubiquitous because it provides a means for governments to check higher education” [4, p. 158]. It should be noted here that the way of checking higher education quality by the governments might be different in different countries based on their historical, political, social, and cultural backgrounds. According to Dill and Beerkens, despite these varieties, governments usually use three standard instruments of regulating quality assurance in higher education: “oversight” or state control, “competition” or marketization, and “mutuality” or self-regulation [6, p. 343].

A new type of governance, which was practiced in the private sector and adopted as a New Public Management, began to emerge in the field of higher education quality assurance [7]. The main idea of the New Public Management was decentralization and promotion of shared governance, which led to a shift from the state’s control to collaborative regulation between institutions and external agencies. Taylor applies the model of shared governance to the university context and highlights the importance of cooperation between the governing body and university insiders for its success in providing quality education [8]. He relates shared governance to the principles of academic freedom, which prioritizes planning and decision-making processes by the university community from the bottom up. However, in the case of Kazakhstan, it seems that the notion of academic freedom is perceived as freedom of the university in general, with little attention to the freedom of faculty members and students.

Neoliberalists conceptualize the notion of quality of education as “measurable outcomes, multiple stakeholders, and quality assurance procedures” [9, p. 177]. The neoliberal system supports self-regulation and self-responsibility, which was increasingly couched by intergovernmental organizations such as the World Bank, the European Union, and the

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [10]. In terms of quality assurance, the traveling idea of developing internal and external quality assurance systems, involving external independent quality assurance agencies, and raising the individual responsibility of faculty members and students has been formed and disseminated by the European Union.

The expansion of the Bologna process has led to a “quality revolution”, which is not about a revolution of quality in general but about altering the approaches and instruments which contribute to providing high-quality education in particular [2, p. 56]. These new approaches suggest reducing the state’s interference in quality assurance and increasing the responsibility of universities.

However, it might be seen that international organizations implicitly exercise colossal power, imposing their ideas on the global agenda. Gay describes this new type of policy regulation as “controlled decontrol” [10, p. 119]. Harvey and Williams describe the European Association for Quality Assurance as the main European-level policy-maker, regulating quality assurance procedures [11]. As a result, this process transformed the higher education landscape within the countries involved. The issue of how successfully the European quality assurance policy has been adopted in the post-Soviet context of Kazakhstan will be further discussed.

Quality assurance policy in Kazakhstan

There is a global emphasis on enhancing the quality of and access to higher education through knowledge exchange and sharing practices among nations. Vögtle and Martens suggest that the most effective approach to improving national policies is to analyze and learn “best or policies perceived as such” from the developed countries [12, pp. 248-249]. It should be noted here that this policy transfer process is quite complex and challenging. An illustrating example of this trend is the Bologna process, and Kazakhstan provides an interesting case of adopting the main principles of the European standards.

As a member of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Kazakhstan has formulated a national quality assurance model in higher education based on the ESG. The national model includes standards for internal and external quality assurance, and state regulation for the quality assurance system [13]. The leading authoritative body in this system is the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (hereinafter – Ministry).

As specified by the Law “On Education”, “the national system for assessing the quality of education is a set of institutional structures, procedures, forms and methods for establishing the conformity of the quality of education with the state mandatory standards of education, the needs of the individual, society and the state” [14, Article 1]. However, there is no definition of quality itself in the Law. So, it is not clear how policy-makers perceive the quality and what are the main attributes of high quality for them.

The main instrument of the state regulation of quality assurance is licensing, which is focused on determining how far universities meet qualification requirements to implement particular educational programs [15]. Omirbayev et al. state that since 2019, professional control procedures of universities have been optimized, namely, the number of qualification requirements has been reduced almost by half [16]. These changes have been implemented in the context of widening the academic autonomy of universities and increasing their responsibility for providing quality education.

The following quality regulation instrument is accreditation by external agencies. Initially, the government failed to develop an accreditation system and replaced it with the state attestation of higher education institutions [3]. After joining the Bologna process and analyzing international practices, the state was obliged to introduce external accreditation again.

Kerimkulova and Kuzhabekova state that the introduction of a new system of accreditation has had positive impacts on the development of the higher education system of the country [15]. There are two types of accreditations adopted in Kazakhstan: institutional and

specialized accreditation, where the former is about assessing the quality of the university in general, and the latter is about assessing the quality of particular educational programs implemented by the university. In 2022, more than 73% of educational programs in Kazakhstani universities were accredited by national quality assurance agencies, and more than 8% have international accreditation [17].

In general, accreditation is carried out voluntarily [14, Article 9-1]. It has been implemented by independent noncommercial and nongovernmental organizations. However, the requirements and rules for the recognition of accreditation bodies, including foreign ones, in the field of higher and postgraduate education were adopted by the Ministry [16]. This shows that although quality control has been transferred from the government to those external organizations, the Ministry remains the authoritative body, regulating it through these rules and the development of a National Register of Accreditation Agencies.

Scheele states that accreditation is a ‘Licence to kill’ [10, p. 9]. This statement might reflect the quality assurance challenges that universities face. For example, Kazakhstani universities are not eligible to issue diplomas and obtain state funding without accreditation [13]. This means that the Ministry possesses an implicit coercive power over autonomous universities and uses accreditation as a new tool for its quality control.

The academic reputation of universities is highly dependent on how well their internal quality assurance system functions. Daromes and Ng state that “internal quality assurance of higher education is standards, procedures, planning and evaluation of activities should encourage, enable, or sometimes "forcing" people in a university to do the best in achieving organizations’ interest” [18, p. 663]. According to Omirbayev et al., in the context of widening the academic freedom of Kazakhstani universities, their responsibility for providing quality education was strengthened as well [13]. Universities have created an internal quality assurance system based on the ESG standards, the primary purpose of which is to develop a quality culture [19]. Quality culture might be formulated by the full participation of the university population, from students and faculty members to university leaders. The key issue here is to provide freedom to all representatives of the academic community, taking into account their viewpoints and voices. However, how effectively does this policy work in reality?

Manarbek and Seyfried state that the Ministry and accreditation agencies are dominant actors in the quality assurance process and there is still a lack of participation of students and faculty members [20]. University rectors see quality only as compliance with the requirements and standards of those dominant actors instead of concentrating on the development of their own internal quality assurance system. According to Tastanbekova, “the lack of substantive stakeholder involvement in higher education process ... leads to the lack of incentive to supporting reform implementation process meaningfully” [21, p. 120]. This means the internal quality assurance system in Kazakhstan still needs reconsideration and providing its democratization. Such a situation might be caused by the consequences of the Soviet regime and the highly centralized quality control system. One should consider how to motivate the university population to participate in the quality assurance process actively.

The quality of university educational programs is also evaluated by the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs “Atameken” [22]. The ranking considers the graduates’ employability, the participation of industry representatives in the curriculum development, how far they are practice-oriented, academic mobility, students’ achievements, etc. The ranking provides competition between universities to improve their academic reputation, which significantly influences future students’ choices and seems to be a quality control instrument by the market.

This section has shown that the Kazakhstani government has developed the national model of quality assurance in higher education, which includes all three instruments suggested by Dill and Beerken: state control, marketization, and self-regulation [6]. Based on textual

consideration of policy documents, some discourses in the quality assurance policy will be further examined.

Discourses in the development of the national model of quality assurance

Kerimkulova and Kuzhabekova find that although the state has substantially improved the quality assurance system, much remains to be done [15]. It is not yet possible to say that the Kazakhstani education system completely matches the Bologna principles. Some changes might be superficial. Tomusk suggests that joining Kazakhstan into the European area was primarily a political maneuver driven by the necessity to reform its post-Soviet higher education system [23]. Yergebekov and Temirbekova support this idea, claiming that “the Bologna process is another area which has turned out to be nothing but a dysfunctional formality in Kazakhstan” [24, p. 1475].

An analysis of the literature and policy documents shows some discourses on the country's quality assurance policy. Firstly, there is discourse of quality control. According to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Education”, “state control over the quality of education is ensured by creating and ensuring the functioning of a national system for assessing the quality of education” [14, Article 8]. At the same time, Kovaleva states that the government developed the policy “moving from quality control to quality improvement” [3, p. 5]. This raises questions of whether the quality of education in Kazakhstan is still under the control of the government or self-regulated by universities in the context of academic autonomy. How far the national system of quality assurance in higher education is decentralized?

The second discourse is about standardized quality. According to the Law “On Education”, “accreditation ... is a procedure ... to recognize the compliance of educational services with established accreditation standards (regulations) to provide objective information about their quality and confirm the availability of effective mechanisms to improve it” [14, Article 1]. Engebretsen et al. argue that accreditation has influenced the understanding of the concept of quality and has led to the shift from academic excellence to the technical measurement needed to meet the minimum standardized requirements [25]. They adapt Foucault's theory of panopticon in the context of higher education accreditation, which is about observing and controlling prisoners' behavior by wardens from the top of the panoptic tower. The authors suggest that standards and criteria of accreditation agencies seem like an instrument of “governing at distance” the quality of education of universities [25, p. 408]. This means that accreditation agencies may control the quality of education at a distance from the panoptical tower through their standards.

In addition to that, it seems that these Ministry's qualification requirements and accreditation agencies' standards duplicate each other to some extent. This raises the question of whether these double-control instruments of quality education are needed. This is one of the highly debated issues. Some European countries have begun to adopt a new instrument of quality assurance, namely quality audit [26]. Quality audits are mostly focused on the development and dialog between different stakeholders rather than on the control of quality in education. Thus, the accreditation seems like a more control-oriented model for some European states, whereas Kazakhstan sees it as a pinnacle of quality assurance.

In general, it is assumed that the implementation of the Bologna principles in Kazakhstan has yielded mixed results. The government's decision to join the process is considered a positive step toward integration into the global village, and there is a need for additional time to address specific questions, including quality assurance issues. Since the Bologna process is based on voluntary policy transfer and allows for the preservation of national values in the national education system, member states, including Kazakhstan, are encouraged to take advantage of these opportunities.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on the state's role in the quality assurance policy in higher education. A policy shift towards the development of the national model of quality assurance in Kazakhstan, which includes internal and external quality assurance systems and state regulation, was the beginning of a new stage. Adopting neoliberal managerialism should have provided decentralization of quality assurance and involvement of all stakeholders. The paper contributes to the literature by describing the state's role in the quality assurance process using licensing and accreditation, how the government provides competition and marketization through the “Atameken” ranking, and how it supports university self-regulation.

However, it is suggested that there is still a discrepancy not only between policy and practice but within the policy as well. Despite the introduction of accreditation by external agencies, it seems to be the Ministry’s instrument to retain state control over the autonomous universities. Although universities were given academic autonomy, they are explicitly and implicitly under the control of the Ministry, with a lack of participation from university insiders in the quality assurance process. Further work is needed to study the role of student engagement in the quality assurance process in order to understand how far the national policy is democratized and how students’ viewpoints are represented appropriately.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declare no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАН РЕСПУБЛИКАСЫНДА ЖОҒАРЫ БІЛІМ САПАСЫН ҚАМТАМАСЫЗ ЕТУДІ МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК РЕТТЕУ

Аңдатпа. Бұл жұмыста сапаны қамтамасыз ету тұжырымдамасы мен үкіметтің осы процестегі рөлі зерттеліп, Қазақстанның кейс-стадияне негізделген кейбір дискурстар баяндалады. Қазақстан білім беру саласын реттейтін жоғары орталықтандырылған кеңестік жүйені мұра етті, оның сапаны қамтамасыз етудің ұлттық моделін әзірлеуге әлі де белгілі бір салдары бар. Қазақстанда сапаны қамтамасыз етудің үш кезеңін қамтитын жүйе әзірленді: сапаны қамтамасыз етудің ішкі және сыртқы жүйелері және мемлекеттік реттеу. Мақаланың негізгі аргументі – сапа кепілдігін басқару мәселесін сыни тұрғыдан қайта қарау қажет. Мақалада сапаны қамтамасыз ету саласындағы саясатты зерттеу үшін әдебиеттерге негізделген талдау қолданылады және осы салада қосымша зерттеулерді қажет ететін кейбір мәселелер ұсынылады.

Түйінді сөздер: сапаны қамтамасыз ету, жоғары білім, мемлекеттік реттеу

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ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЕ РЕГУЛИРОВАНИЕ ОБЕСПЕЧЕНИЯ КАЧЕСТВА ВЫСШЕГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ В РЕСПУБЛИКЕ КАЗАХСТАН

Абстракт. В данном документе предполагается рассмотреть концепцию обеспечения качества и роль правительства в этом процессе, а также выделить некоторые рассуждения, основанные на тематическом исследовании Казахстана. Казахстан унаследовал высокоцентрализованную советскую систему регулирования сферы образования, которая до сих пор имеет некоторые последствия для разработки национальной модели обеспечения качества. Казахстан разработал систему, которая включает в себя три этапа обеспечения качества: внутреннюю и внешнюю системы обеспечения качества и государственное регулирование. Основной аргумент статьи заключается в том, что вопрос управления обеспечением качества нуждается в

критическом пересмотре. В статье используется анализ литературы для изучения политики в области обеспечения качества и предлагаются некоторые вопросы, требующие дальнейшего изучения в этой области.

Ключевые слова: обеспечение качества, высшее образование, государственное регулирование

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