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FUNDAMENTALS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Abstract

This study explores the critical issue of quality assurance in higher education systems, both in Kazakhstan and globally, where universities operate in a «consumer market» with students selecting educational programs, institutions, and resources. Based on an analysis of international and domestic research, the study aims to identify the foundations of quality assurance in higher education. The authors highlight key aspects of higher education quality, including student quality, teaching characteristics, academic regulations, and administrative support. Educational quality is examined within the context of international standards as a matter of national importance, with education levels serving as a foundation for economic development of both state and society. The research analysis reveals that various approaches, methods, and criteria for quality management are employed in creating systems for ensuring and assessing the quality of higher education institutions in Kazakhstan and abroad. These include the evaluative method of university activity quality management (SWOT analysis), Total Quality Management (TQM) strategy, and an approach based on the requirements of international quality standards ISO 9000:2000. The study notes that Kazakhstan has adopted a management model based on the ISO 9000:2000 international quality standards. This comprehensive review contributes to the understanding of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education and their implications for educational policy and practice.

Keywords: quality assurance, higher education, Kazakhstan, international standards, quality management.

Introduction. Ensuring the quality of the education system is a crucial issue not only in Kazakhstan but also worldwide, where universities operate in a «consumer market» and students have the freedom to select educational programs, institutes, libraries, resources, and acquire knowledge (Chapman & Adams, 2002; Doherty, 2008). The study aims to determine the fundamentals of supporting quality in the higher education system by analyzing foreign and domestic research conducted by various scholars (Arcaro, 1995; Barrett et al., 2006; Belohlav et al., 2004; Calvo-Mora et al., 2006; Crawford & Shutler, 1999; Fernández Cruz et al., 2016; Frederiks et al., 1994; Hopkins, 2015;

Ingason, 2015; Kusainov, 2013; Laevers, 1994; Navaratnam, 1997; Permyakov, 2007; Puyt et al., 2020; Taskov & Mitreva, 2015; Vlašić et al., 2009; Yelezhanova et al., 2020; Zaharias & Pappas, 2016).

The authors emphasize various aspects that contribute to the quality of higher education, including the quality of students, teaching characteristics, academic regulations, and administrative support.

The quality of education is addressed in accordance with international standards as a task of national significance, recognizing that the level of education serves as the foundation for the economic development of the state and society.

An analysis of research indicates that in developing systems for ensuring and evaluating the quality of activities in higher education institutions, both in Kazakhstan and internationally, various approaches, methods, and criteria for quality management are utilized (Barrett et al., 2006; Yelezhanova et al., 2020). These include:

The evaluative method of managing university activity quality, specifically SWOT analysis (Puyt et al., 2020);

Total Quality Management (TQM) strategy (Taskov & Mitreva, 2015);

An approach based on the requirements of international quality standards ISO 9000:2000 (Ingason, 2015).

Notably, Kazakhstan has adopted a management model that aligns with the requirements of international quality standards ISO 9000:2000 (Kusainov, 2013; Permyakov, 2007).

In the history of human development, education is one of the factors of economic and social progress, contributing to the development of society, enhancing human potential, along with the global level of general and professional culture of society, as well as the integration of an individual into national and world culture. It ensures the formation of a personality oriented towards development.

Quality assurance in the education system has become an important issue worldwide, as universities represent a «consumer market» and students can choose educational programs, institutes, libraries, resources, and acquire knowledge.

Aspects of higher education quality include the quality of students, teaching features, academic rules, and administrative support.

Materials and Methods. Research Model: This study employed a systematic literature review method with elements of comparative analysis.

Data Collection: Data were collected through the analysis of scientific publications focused on quality assurance in higher education. Databases used included Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Key search terms included «quality assurance», «higher education», «education quality management», «TQM in education», and «ISO 9000 in universities».

Ensuring Validity and Reliability: To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the following source selection criteria were used:

- 1. Publications in peer-reviewed journals
- 2. Works published within the last 20 years
- 3. Studies focusing on higher education systems

Data Analysis: The collected data were analyzed using the content analysis method. The main approaches to ensuring education quality were systematized and categorized.

Data Interpretation: Interpretation was conducted by comparing various approaches to education quality assurance, identifying common trends and peculiarities in the application of these approaches in different contexts.

In the scientific literature, there are many variations in the definition of the concept of «quality of education» reflecting the essence of the described phenomenon differently. For example, G.D. Doherty defined the quality of higher education as:

- 1) transcendent quality, the result of the prestige and competence of the teaching staff;
- 2) quality based on production, a service that meets the specification and can be used in its creation;
- 3) quality based on the product, advanced knowledge of students, improved by the teacher based on developed curricula;
- 4) quality based on values, based on accessibility;
- 5) quality based on the user, in accordance with the needs, desires, and preferences of students (Doherty, 2008).

According to C.Bayne-Jardine, the quality of education is the relationship between the goal and the result, a measure of achieving goals (results), and the goals will be operational and predictable only in the area of the learner's potential development (Bayne-Jardine, 2005).

P.Zaharias and C.Pappas give the following definition: «The quality of education is the degree to which the expectations of various participants in the pedagogical process are met by the educational services provided by the university» (Zaharias, 2016).

Improving the quality of education in accordance with international requirements is a task of national importance. For example, A.K. Kusainov studies the level of education as the main foundation for the economic development of the state and society. According to him, an effective education system includes three classes of elements: «standards and accountability (international requirements, information transparency, equality of access), human capital (best candidates, improving pedagogical competence, strong leadership at the school level); management structure public apparatus, (effective participation, responsibility)» (Kusainov, 2013).

S.Vlašić, S.Vale, and D.K. Puhar link the process of ensuring the quality of education with the process of standardization and identify three areas of pedagogical standards: conceptual, normative, and methodological (Vlašić, 2009).

At the level of standards for core curricula and disciplines, the content and procedural aspects of general secondary education are regulated in a normative manner. The methodological component includes curricula, textbooks, and teaching materials.

Overall, the quality of education reflects the standards that need to be met to achieve the set goals. At the same time, the guarantee of the quality of education is understood as a mechanism for monitoring the achievement of a set of goals. When assessing the quality of education, ENQA recommends working in three areas:

- a) ensuring appropriate and sustainable resources and their effectiveness;
- b) integration of advanced achievements in teaching and research;
- c) transparency of higher education institutions and improvement of their international activities (Permyakov, 2007).

The quality of education is the requirements of the labor market, which change depending on the economic situation and the compliance of the graduate's work result. Let's highlight the main characteristics of the category «quality of education»:

- compliance of the knowledge and skills of graduates with the planned level;
 - compliance with established standards;
- compliance with the requirements of state certification and accreditation;
- the degree of satisfaction of the expectations of various participants in the educational process (society, state, students, employers) (Arcaro, 1995).

According to D.W. Chapman and D.K. Adams, the quality of education should be considered in two dimensions: the quality of the holistic pedagogical process, as a consequence - educational services and graduate training (Chapman, 2002). This is reflected in the difference between the internal and external components of the quality of education (Table 1).

Table 1. Components of education quality

Internal components External components Conditions of a holistic pedagogical process Student education and compliance of education with the requirements of their parents The quality of the implementation of the holistic Compliance of education with the State mandatory pedagogical process standard of higher education The quality of the results of the holistic The image of the university as a guarantee of quality pedagogical process education Internal components of the field of pedagogy Compliance with the requirements of the modern labor market and personnel policy

Defining the concept of «quality of education», we have identified three main areas in the work of the university, proposed by D.Hopkins (Hopkins, 2015):

- ensuring the quality of the content of education;
- ensuring the quality of educational outcomes (the quality of education of university graduates);

- ensuring the quality of educational technologies (the quality of teaching and upbringing methods).

Focusing on the most important problem of ensuring the quality training of a future graduate, we note that the goal of an educational institution is a competitive specialist with the required level of training.

Speaking about managing the quality of training of a future teacher, one should focus on all the components of the scheme:

- any process, including educational, depends on the input parameters (the educational process at the university depends on the level of preparedness of applicants: assessing them at the «entrance» to the holistic pedagogical process, we thereby measure the quality of this initial stage);

- each area of training should be provided with a high-quality Educational program, educational and material resources, and a qualified teaching staff, which guarantees the quality of student training at different levels of the educational process; it should be taken into account that without improving academic disciplines and teaching technologies, that is, without improving the educational process, it is impossible to achieve compliance (quality) of graduate training with the requirements of the state compulsory standard of higher education.

It is known that any process is managed more efficiently if there is feedback, positive or negative. For the holistic pedagogical process, this is the quality of education received through the eyes of the student, since the graduate is a consumer of educational services. Questioning students allows identifying the most significant disciplines for the formation of professional competence, i.e., the graduate himself assesses the quality of the education received from the inside, as a process in which he is a participant.

At the present stage, a significant improvement in the quality of the system in the development of vocational education is reflected in the formation of the applied level of theory. The quality of education is considered by many foreign authors as a positive and dynamic idea. For example, L.Ed. Crawford and P. Shutler consider it as an investment in the content of education (Crawford, 1999), K.K. Navaratnam

defines the quality of products and services as a planned, implemented, evaluative, ongoing process, which has its own solution, and the search for quality should not be consumeroriented (Navaratnam, 1997).

The quality of education is designed to satisfy customer needs, continuous improvement, motivation for leadership, development of human resources, evaluation and reward, coordinated teamwork, monitoring, and decision-making.

F. J. Fernandez Cruz, I. Egido Galvez, and R. Carballo Santaolalla argue that when the quality of education corresponds to the learning outcomes, they are achieved and are the planned goals, features, and requirements. However, quality is not a vague concept, but a conscious planned effort at all stages and components of this activity (Fernandez, 2016).

The essence of the ideology of modern pedagogical education as a system of ideals and goals is not to give it new knowledge, goals, values, and personal meaning, but to reveal the main strength of the teacher - his intellectual and moral potential. The ability to move freely in the cultural environment, implementing not only modern pedagogical technologies but also innovative processes, improving the process of self-development and personal qualities.

The results of modern pedagogical education are aimed at the formation of a personality:
a) a developed, spiritually and morally rich personality; b) a teacher who has mastered modern knowledge and works with students; c) a specialist in a certain field of science that can be taken into account in the modern education system and cultural practice. These requirements correspond to the modern system of pedagogical education.

In recent years, there has been high competition among educational universities for each potential student. The main task of the educational policy of any country is to ensure high quality of education based on maintaining its fundamentality and compliance with the current and future needs of the individual, society, and the state. In order to be competitive, it is necessary to quickly adapt, open new demanded areas of training, ensure the quality of education, introduce new teaching methods,

update the regulatory and laboratory base, and increase the level of competence of the teaching staff. At the same time, the issue of competition among universities is quite acute. Let's consider what has been done to solve the problem of ensuring the quality of professional competence in the Republic of Kazakhstan in higher education.

First of all, in order to integrate into the global educational space, in 2010, the universities of the Republic switched to the Bologna Process, which involves the creation of an integrated pan-European system of higher education based on common principles of organization and quality standards of higher education. At the same time, the concept of quality of education covers teaching and research work, leadership and management of an educational institution, the ability to satisfy the needs of students, and the provision of other services to society by universities.

Second, one of the necessary conditions for any university to confirm its status is the presence of a quality management system. Universities operating in a competitive environment feel the need to develop such systems and obtain effectiveness and efficiency from their implementation. There are two main ways of forming a QMS in universities:

- development of a unique model of a quality management system based on the example of a specific educational institution, partly universal and applicable to other organizations;
- use of universal principles for creating modern quality management systems used in various spheres of human activity, i.e., direct application of the principles of total quality management (TQM), which are reflected in the requirements of the international ISO 9000:2000 standards and the criteria of national quality awards.

The main form of activity of a university is the provision of educational services. An educational service is a set of purposefully created offered opportunities for acquiring knowledge and skills in order to satisfy educational needs.

The state, society, employers, students, and their parents are interested in improving the quality of education. Currently, most

universities, when organizing their activities, are mainly focused on meeting the requirements of the state reflected in the state compulsory educational standards and indicators of state certification and accreditation of universities. Both can be considered as regulatory requirements for an educational service, the need for compliance with which is a condition for the existence of universities with budget funding.

To the greatest extent, employers are consumers of university graduates, since it is in the sphere of the real economy that the result of an educational service, expressed in the knowledge and skills of a graduate, can fully manifest itself. Therefore, it is obvious that by cooperating with potential employers, universities should determine which characteristics of graduates are most significant for them.

When creating systems for ensuring and evaluating the quality of higher education institutions in Kazakhstan and abroad (Barrett, 2006), various approaches, methods and criteria for quality management are used:

- evaluation method of university quality management (SWOT analysis);
 - TQM strategy;
- an approach based on the requirements of the international quality standards ISO 9000:2000.

The quality assessment method based on SWOT analysis involves systematic self-assessment to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the university's activities, as well as positive and negative factors of its development. Based on the use of this method, measures are developed and proposed to resolve problematic situations and improve the activities of the institution of higher education.

In accordance with the terms of the evaluation method, the assessment of activities is based on statistical data obtained from centralized university services (HR, planning and finance department, accounting, research part, etc.), annual reports of departments and information provided by the deans of institutes. Based on these data, relative indicators (per teacher, researcher,

student) are calculated for the university as a whole, as well as for each institute individually.

Based on the data obtained, a self-assessment report is being prepared. The purpose of the self-assessment report is to analyze all aspects of the university's activities that have an impact on the quality of education and research. In the process of conducting a self-assessment of an educational institution, a SWOT analysis is used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the university's activities, as well as positive and negative factors of its development. The peculiarity of this method is that its parameters and characteristics may vary depending on national and local characteristics (Puyt, 2020).

The quality assessment method based on the principles of TQM (Universal Quality Management) is based on a deeper analysis of the university's activities as a manufacturer of products and services. The TQM concept assumes that the university has a clearly and clearly formulated mission, strategic goals that have been developed as a result of comprehensive studies of the needs of the external environment in the main products of the university's activities (Taskov, 2015).

When choosing a TQM strategy, the main goal of an organization's functioning is quality in the broadest sense of the word. It is not only about the quality of the services or products themselves, but about the quality of the organization's interaction with the outside world, the quality of its functioning and management, and the quality of life of its employees (table 2).

Table 2.*TQM* methods and tools in the holistic pedagogical process

Planning and management tools	affinity diagram – collecting and grouping ideas relationship graph – identification of cause-and-effect relationships tree – decomposition of tasks for their solution priority matrix - search for relationships flowchart of the decision-making process, coupled planning - network graph, drawing up a decision-making plan matrix diagram – search for relationships
Methods of organizing the thought process	reformulation of the problem – identification of the structure of the problem and the relationship between its elements brainstorming – collective development of ideas brainstorming – a structured process of generating ideas in writing
Quality control tools	causal diagram - analysis of the underlying causes of the problem Pareto diagram - identification of key problems timeline - identification of trends graph - identification of the relationship between variables histogram - adjustment, spread, form of the process control map - identification of sources of variation

And another method based on the requirements of international quality standards ISO 9000:2000 involves identifying interested parties, identifying their requirements for product quality, and creating a system of continuous improvement of activities. This method is based on the fundamental principles of quality management, including the process approach. In contrast to the TQM model, the key management tool becomes a documented management system focused on quality.

In particular, such documents are developed as "quality manual", "documentation manage-

ment», «personnel management», «classroom fund management», «logistics management», «library information resources management», «management of the selection process for applicants», etc. To support and facilitate the application of this documentation, an information model of the quality management system is created, which is accessible to all interested audiences. A feature of ISO-based models is that they do not imply uniformity in the structure of quality management and uniformity of documentation, which introduces specificity

into university models of management systems (Ingason, 2015).

In accordance with the requirements of international standards, the quality system is interpreted as a quality management system consisting of three subsystems: a quality management system, a quality assurance system, and a quality confirmation system. Quality management is based on documentation that describes all processes, as well as the actions of process participants to achieve the required level of quality. The necessary documentation is available in each university, primarily technological documentation (educational programs), regulations on structural units, internal audit plans, etc.

Technological and regulatory documentation form the foundation of the entire quality management system, so it must be brought in line with modern requirements (including the requirements of state standards).

The mandatory documents of the quality system include (Laevers, 1994):

- goals and policy in the field of quality;
- quality management instruction;
- description of processes;
- description of the interaction between processes;
- registered quality data (quantitative indicators).

Results and Discussion. Currently, universities use the following models of quality management systems based on the above methods:

EFQM Model (European Foundation for Management). Among European organizations, the most popular model is the European Quality Award model developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). The application of the EFQM model involves not only a competitive assessment but also a serious diagnostic study and measurement of the strength and effectiveness of the organization's management potential, an assessment of the maturity of the management system relative to the reference level, identifying strengths, as well as areas where it is advisable to make improvements (Calvo-Mora, 2006).

The model of the national American quality award «Baldrige National Quality Award» in the field of education. This model is based on criteria in education for achieving excellence: leadership, strategic planning, focus on students, stakeholders and the market, measurements, analysis and knowledge management, focus on faculties and staff, process management, results (Belohlav, 2004).

The model of the quality management system according to the international standard ISO 9001:2000. This model assumes a demonstration of the university's ability to produce products that satisfy the consumer, and his requests are regularly monitored and studied. In accordance with the requirements of ISO 9001:2000, the main goal of the university should be to increase the satisfaction of clients - individuals, society and the state - in educational services, training of specialists, scientific products, etc. (Ingason, 2015).

Model of the Association of Universities of the Netherlands (VSNU). This model is based on the idea of dividing all university activities into three main business processes: educational activities, research and services offered to society (Frederiks, 1994).

Benchmarking model for Australian universities. The aim of this model was to develop a perfect Guide to Benchmarking Australian Universities (Griffith University, 1994) in order to conduct self-assessment and independent assessment of their activities and results obtained, and to evaluate the university's quality management system. The Benchmarking Guide is intended:

- to provide the university's senior management with tools for identifying development trends and conducting continuous improvement of activities;
- for structural units of universities wishing to compare the quality of various types of their activities;
- to determine the competitiveness of the university.

The Belgian-Dutch model (HBO Expert Group) or «Method for improving the quality of higher education based on the EFQM model» was developed in 1999 by an expert group consisting of representatives from the Netherlands, Denmark and Belgium. The method is focused on quality management issues in higher education institutions and can be used for self-assessment and determining directions for improving the activities of an educational institution, and also allows universities to thoroughly prepare for an external check (Yelezhanova, 2020).

ENQA standards guidelines. and coordinate the development of European quality standards and solve the problems of certification and accreditation of educational programs and institutions, the European Network (Association) of Quality Assurance Organizations (ENQA) in the field of higher education was created. In accordance with the decision of the Berlin Declaration, ENQA has developed the «Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education in the European Region». This document is the basis for building systems of internal and external assessment and quality assurance of education and accreditation of European agencies for assessing the quality of education (Permyakov, 2007).

Each model is applied in universities of different countries depending on the policy and structure of the educational institution. As is known, Kazakhstan has chosen a management model based on the requirements of international quality standards ISO 9000:2000. The choice of the model is most likely explained by the presence of the following advantages (Ingason, 2015): the transformation of the educational process into a modern system focused on quality, i.e. focused on meeting the needs of stakeholders and, first of all, the student as the main consumer of education; improving the quality of the recruitment of applicants; growth in the level of attendance and academic performance of students; advantages in licensing and certification; measurability of indicators by which teaching work is evaluated; growth in the level of competence of teachers, improvement of the level of qualification in conducting disciplines; clear planning of the schedule, advance information about changes in the schedule and replacements of teachers; streamlining the management of external and internal documentation, including in cases of changes made to the documentation, and familiarizing specialists with them; increasing the overall competitiveness and image of teachers and the university; visibility of the university's compliance with the accreditation indicator «effectiveness of the intra-university system for ensuring the quality of education».

Conclusion. The quality of education is the conformity of education (as a result, as a process, as a social system) with the diverse needs and interests of the individual, society, and the state; it is a systemic set of hierarchically organized, significant essential properties socially (characteristics, parameters) of education (as a result, as a process, as a social system) or a set of consumer properties of an educational service that provides the opportunity to satisfy a complex of needs for the comprehensive development of the student's personality. The main factors that determine the quality of education are: the teaching staff; educational and methodological support; material and technical base; intellectual potential of the educational institution; students and graduates. The main task of the educational policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan is to ensure high quality of education based on maintaining its fundamentality and compliance with the current and future needs of the individual, society and the state. To address the challenge of ensuring professional competence quality in higher education, a transition to an integrated pan-European system has been implemented, along with the introduction of effectiveness and efficiency systems (Yelezhanova et al., 2020). These systems include: An evaluative method for managing university quality activities, specifically SWOT analysis (Puyt et al., 2020); Total Quality Management (TQM) strategy (Taskov & Mitreva, 2015); An approach based on the requirements of international quality standards ISO 9000:2000 (Ingason, 2015). These initiatives aim to enhance the quality assurance processes in higher education institutions and align them with international standards (Fernández Cruz et al., 2016).

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