

## **Higher education and the Bologna process**

Quality assurance in education is an innovative path to progress. An effectively operating system of quality assurance in education makes universities competitive in the education and labour markets. During the years of independence, Kazakhstani higher schools demonstrated flexibility and adaptability to the most difficult conditions of the transition period. Despite the crisis, it was possible to preserve the intellectual potential of the country to ensure the accessibility of higher education. The most important innovative change in the higher education system was the entry of Kazakhstan in 2010 into the Bologna process. Following, accreditation has become an important and necessary resource to ensure quality and to promote the international character of higher education according to European standards. The autonomy of universities in light of the Bologna process was realized in the Kazakhstani higher school by refusing the State Education Programme Standard, followed by the forming of educational programmes with a high level of academic freedom in 2012. Kazakhstan as a developing Central Asian country has been on the way to integration of processes of accreditation into the system of education.

Kazakhstan joined the Bologna process in 2010 and was the first Central Asian country to become a full member of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The most common error of application of another context in the national content can become a great challenge for members of organizations. To illustrate, the introduction of the Bologna process in Kazakhstan has led to tremendous changes and breakthroughs in the higher education system of the country. The failure to adapt and recognize the national context in implementing the guidelines and regulations of the Bologna process has triggered some confusion and misunderstandings among administrative and faculty staff of the universities. The shift from the old system (Soviet) to the new one required not only changes in documentation, policies, and laws, but it also required a change of thinking and perception of external and internal stakeholders of higher education institutions.

More than a decade has passed since the introduction of European standards into the higher education system of Kazakhstan. There are still existing administrative challenges and burdens caused by the European model of quality assurance. Despite existing drawbacks, higher education institutions in Kazakhstan have stepped into a new age, where accreditation has become an important part of quality assurance procedures in education. Today, the state funding of tuition at universities, research funding, and academic mobility of students and academics are all tied to the accreditation status of the university and programmes.

Quality assurance in education is key to the high performance and mission of universities, given that leaders of higher education should not be satisfied by the outputs at national or global rankings; it is of utmost significance to administrators of higher education institutions to acknowledge the limitations of rankings. Efforts must be focused on both inputs and outputs. The need to introduce an accreditation procedure in the system of higher education in Kazakhstan was due to several reasons:

- implementation of agreements between member-states of the European Higher Education Area, according to which mutual recognition of diplomas of higher and professional institutions is carried out only for graduates of accredited universities and colleges;
- integration of the system of higher and postgraduate education in Kazakhstan in the Bologna process;
- cooperation with international networks on the quality of education for informative and practical exchange to develop comparable criteria and procedures. As evidence of such cooperations, Kazakhstan participates in international quality assurance networks such as the International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAAHE),

the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the Eurasian Network for the Quality of Education (ECCE), to develop comparable criteria and methodology in quality assurance;

- advancement of quality in education - in the interests of the satisfaction of all stakeholders and to ensure the international competitiveness of the national education system.
- to stimulate the mobility of students, academics and researchers.

Considering the Bologna process membership, the system of higher education has faced tremendous changes and challenges in terms of the implementation of the Bologna process indicators. However, a positive trend in the development of higher education in Kazakhstan should be highlighted as well. To illustrate, an adaption of a three-tier higher education system, comprising of bachelor's, master's, and PhD degrees, introduction of the ECTS academic credit system to calculate students' overall workload, promotion of academic mobility for students and academics, and the issue of European Diploma Supplement documents.

### **The status quo of accreditation in Kazakhstan**

The emergence of quality assurance networks, accreditation agencies and the development of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) and the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) have contributed to new developments and changes in higher education. The integration of higher education into the EHEA has introduced accreditation as an important quality assurance tool in compliance with the ESG. National registers were developed to collect data on quality assurance processes in Kazakhstan in 2011 by listing accreditation agencies, accredited programmes and institutions. The national register I provides the list of recognized accreditation agencies, eligible to accredit institutions and programmes; the register II lists accredited higher education institutions and, the last one covers all accredited degree programmes in Kazakhstan.

In Kazakhstan, there are in total of 12 accrediting organizations recognized by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science, where half of them are foreign accreditation bodies, among them are agencies from the US, Germany and Belgium.

Accrediting organizations in Kazakhstan are not divided by programme or institutional accreditation. Any recognized accrediting organization is eligible to accredit a university and programme according to their standards developed in compliance with the ESG 2015 (European Standards and Guidelines, 2015). However, there are some accreditation agencies which are profiled in a specific field of study. They are ASIIN (Accreditation Agency for Study Programmes in Engineering, Informatics, Natural Sciences and Mathematics), FIBAA (Foundation for International Business Administration), ABET (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology) MusiQuE (Music Quality Enhancement), ECAQA (Eurasian Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Health Care) and ACBSP - the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs). In total, there are 120 higher education institutions in Kazakhstan, and approximately 80 % of them have institutional accreditation.

### **New trends in Higher education in Kazakhstan**

According to the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs (2012), Kazakhstan as a Central Asian country is recognized as a market-oriented economy by the European Union and the US Department of Commerce.

For more than decades, the higher education system in Kazakhstan has been encountering external pressures and competition for quality and funding. The higher education system of Kazakhstan has practised various important policies, ceaseless series of reforms, programmes, regulations, and experimentations to improve quality. Different approaches have been adopted to introduce quality management practices in universities such as ISO 90001:2015, self-assessment practices, external assessment procedures, participation in the world university and national rankings, and accreditation and certification systems. The development of the economy, the transformation of higher education institutions into non-profit organizations, reforms in the management of universities, the increasing competition in the labour market, as well as the changing demands of the external environment have led to the issue of quality assurance as the most important topic of government and university administration. Despite the implementation of diverse quality assurance procedures in higher education, the issue of quality education and compliance with the demands of the labour market remains crucial. The increasing pressure from various external stakeholders (employers, society, government, students) and recent governmental reforms on granting more autonomy to higher education institutions have challenged university administrations to reconsider the way they govern and respond to external requirements and changes.

The State programme for 2011-2020 pointed out the engagement of all interested parties in decision-making processes which can improve quality management practices in education. It should be noted that the reforms initiated by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan in terms of academic and managerial expansion of universities are aimed at increasing their social responsibility for quality education, performance and the formation of a modern worldview of the younger generation.

As reported in the 'Law On Education' (2018), the academic independence of universities is demonstrated through: development of degree programmes, rules and procedures for enrollment of students, design of university structure and staff, creation of affiliated research institutes, endowment funds for the development of the university, and identification of major commercial activities of institutions.

In the framework of the Bologna process, higher education institutions practice big steps in obtaining more academic freedom. The National Chamber of Entrepreneurs of the Republic of Kazakhstan "Atameken" was created to strengthen the negotiating power of business with public sector organizations. The role of this body together with the Ministry of Higher Education and Science is to define the rankings of the quality of programmes and to evaluate to what extent programmes meet employers' expectations. The new reform was introduced in 2018 and focused on the expansion of the academic, managerial and financial autonomy of HEIs, where academic freedom is defined by granting empowerment to universities to independently design and develop degree programmes to improve the quality of education and to meet expectations and needs of the labour market. As for managerial autonomy, public universities are free to create their management system. Starting in 2020, all public and national HEIs have been transferred to non-profit joint stock organizations with 100% state participation. This enabled universities to carry out diverse commercial activities such as the attraction of research funding, financial resources based on research performance, creation of branches in foreign states, etc. Namely, financial autonomy enables the creation of start-ups and research units, and the commercialization of research outcomes. Given this, the most important aspect of the financial independence of HEIs is the creation of endowment funds, which will enable the allocation of all financial resources to the development of universities.

In the context of university independence and academic freedom, universities have already taken the first steps towards obtaining more freedom and autonomy in their academic activities:

- Development of degree programmes in compliance with the European standards at all levels;
- Promotion of academic mobility of students and academic staff;
- Lifelong learning process;
- Increasing attractiveness of universities, the ability to be open to all regions of the world;
- Emphasis on the development of student-centred learning;
- Freedom to design the content of all level programmes to the needs and requirements of the labour market.
- The creation of the Board of Trustees, Supervisory Boards, and the Board of Directors in universities.

The results of the OECD study highlighted the Kazakhstani government's attempts to promote more financial, academic and managerial flexibility in universities. As a result, the Ministry of Higher Education and Science and subordinate organizations adopted the Law on the expansion of universities' independence. The amendments made in the framework of the Law reflected the following updates.

Table 1 – Expansion of university autonomy in the framework of the Law 2018

<b>Changes introduced in the Law</b>	
Academic autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expansion of autonomy up to 80-95%</li> <li>• Academic honesty as a fundamental principle of university activities</li> <li>• Independent development and approval of admission rules</li> <li>• Independently awarding students with bachelor's and master's degrees.</li> <li>• Development of qualification characteristics for employee positions.</li> <li>• Development and approval of the rules for competitive replacement of positions of academic and research staff</li> </ul>
Financial autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of endowment funds, start-up companies</li> <li>• Universities' ability to independently open legal entities for research and academic activities</li> <li>• Universities' ability to open branches in foreign countries</li> <li>• Universities' ability to independently attract additional sources of funding.</li> </ul>
Managerial autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supervisory Boards in 28 state universities</li> <li>• Boards of Trustees in 42 state universities</li> <li>• Introduction of a mechanism to select rectors (university presidents) through supervisory boards (22 rectors have been elected).</li> <li>• Involvement of 82 foreign top managers in the university management.</li> </ul>

Indeed, granting autonomy to national universities will lead to increased responsibility for quality educational services and accountability to the government and society. In addition, recently introduced reforms in the education system, taking their roots from the best practices of Western countries, will indeed reduce public expenditure through competition, market

mechanisms and customer orientation. Undoubtedly, the newly adapted reforms will certainly promote quality education. However, the extent of its successful adaptation and implementation in compliance with national peculiarities and the philosophy of the HE system is much more important.

This year, Kazakhstan has accepted the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) co-chairmanship, together with the Czech Republic. The co-chairmanship lasted from July 1 to December 31, 2022, and involved the participation of Kazakhstan in the BFUG Board meetings. The co-chairmanship of Kazakhstan in the Bologna process demonstrates the recognition and development of the Kazakhstani Higher education system in the European Higher Education Area. The most crucial input of the co-chairmanship is the promotion of regional leadership in higher education and the creation of the Central Asian Higher Education Area based on indicators of the Bologna process.

## Reference

1. The state programme for the development of the Republic of Kazakhstan. <https://www.zakon.kz/4915375-vuzy-rk-poluchat-akademicheskuyu-education-svobodu.html>
2. [https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/ru/accreditation/accredited\\_organizations](https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/ru/accreditation/accredited_organizations).
3. Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs. 2012 investment climate statement: Kazakhstan. – 2012. <http://www.state.gov/e/eb/rls/othr/ics/2012/191174.htm>
4. The State Programme of Education Development for the period of 2011- 2020. [www.edu.gov.kz](http://www.edu.gov.kz) – site of Ministry of education and science of Kazakhstan.
5. The State Law ‘On education’ 27 July 2007. No 319-III. [http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z070000319\\_](http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z070000319_)
6. The National Chamber of Entrepreneurs of the Republic of Kazakhstan “Atameken” <https://atameken.kz/en/>
7. The state programme for the development of education. <https://www.zakon.kz/4915375-vuzy-rk-poluchat-akademicheskuyu-svobodu.html>
8. National Report on Education of RK. Национальный доклад о состоянии и развитии системы образования РК [http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/0\\_nacionalnyy\\_doklad\\_za\\_2018\\_god\\_final\\_s\\_o\\_blozhkami\\_na\\_sayt\\_compressed\\_0.pdf](http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/0_nacionalnyy_doklad_za_2018_god_final_s_o_blozhkami_na_sayt_compressed_0.pdf)
9. The State Programme of Education Development for the period of 2011- 2020. [www.edu.gov.kz](http://www.edu.gov.kz) – site of Ministry of education and science of Kazakhstan.
10. Higher Education in Kazakhstan 2017, Reviews of National Policies for Education, OECD Publishing, Paris. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264268531-en>
11. Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan July 4, 2018 "On Amendments and Additions to Certain Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Expansion of Academic and Management Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions"