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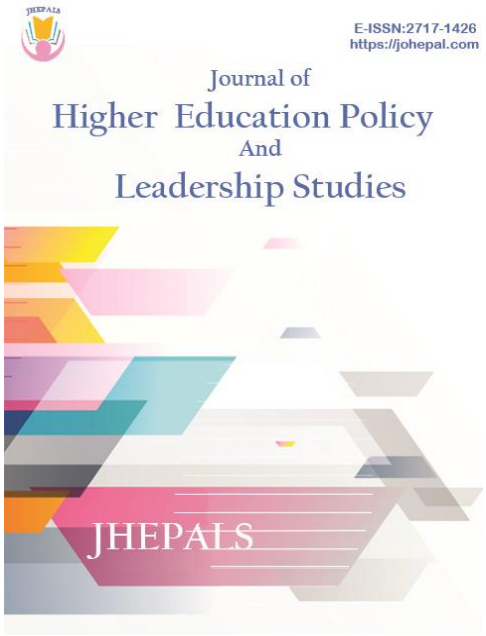

Quality Assurance Practices in Higher Education: Lessons from the U.S. and Implications for Kazakhstan

Gulden Manarbek
Department of Management,
Higher School of Economics and Business,
al-Farabi Kazakh National University,
KAZAKHSTAN
Email: Gulden.Manarbek@kaznu.edu.kz
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1913-1858

Saltanat Kondybayeva
Department of Economics,
Higher School of Economics and Business,
al-Farabi Kazakh National University, KAZAKHSTAN
Email: Saltanat.Kondybayeva@kaznu.edu.kz
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3496-3545

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Gulden Manarbek *
Saltanat Kondybayeva

Abstract

This study explores quality assurance practices in the higher education system of the United States, focusing on implications for higher education in Kazakhstan. Examining these practices is crucial due to the prevalent use of peer review mechanisms in higher education quality management. Understanding how quality management operates in this context is essential for Kazakhstan's ongoing efforts to enhance the quality of its higher education system and align with international standards. The paper uses content-based analysis to scrutinise quality evaluation documentation, drawing insights from the U.S. quality assurance experience, using correlation analysis. The research findings reveal the importance of internal institutional assessment and evaluation procedures in improving the quality of higher education and fostering continuous enhancement processes. The conclusion offers insights into how the research findings can enhance quality management practices within the Kazakhstani higher education system. Recommendations include reconsidering accreditation agency guidelines and establishing a national independent organization to oversee the accreditation activities of accreditation bodies, ensuring quality education and providing ongoing training for quality managers in Kazakhstani higher education institutions.

Keywords: Accreditation; Quality Management; Innovation Management; Quality Assurance; Higher Education; Kazakhstan; U.S.

* **Corresponding author's email:** Gulden.Manarbek@kaznu.edu.kz

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Introduction

Today, innovation and change are not only inherent to private sectors (Hüsig & Mann, 2010). Given the rapid pace of change in the world, public organizations such as higher education are shifting the way they behave, manage, and respond to the outside environment. Today, knowledge and innovation-driven society, demands of the modern economy and the emergence of market-oriented approaches in the higher education sector force university leaders to reconsider their current existing quality and management and administrative practices and to enhance their competitive potential in labour and education markets. The dynamic state of the external environment, high level of competitiveness and managerial freedom of institutions triggered the need for innovative practices in the way how they are managed. Changes within an organization are mainly triggered by innovation (Hüsig & Mann, 2010), whereas innovation is initiated by new ideas to implement (Rogers, 1995).

The increasing competition for students, funding, market shares and rising accountability of universities for quality in the framework of autonomy is changing the way institutions respond to external forces. Apart from strategic planning and decision-making procedures, the more necessary condition for the survival of an organization is innovation in university management.

In global higher education, quality assurance is crucial for maintaining academic standards and driving continuous improvement. It impacts the quality of education, student outcomes, institutional performance, and market attractiveness. In this context, examining and learning from established quality assurance systems, such as those in the United States, offers valuable insights for other countries aiming to enhance their higher education systems.

Kazakhstan, working to align its higher education with international standards, faces challenges in implementing effective quality assurance, particularly in internal assessment, accreditation, and performance evaluation. 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) contributed to new developments and changes in higher education area in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan joined the Bologna process in 2010 and it is the first Central Asian country, to become a full member of the European Higher Education Area. The introduction of the Bologna process has led to tremendous changes and breakthroughs in the country's higher education system. The shift from the old system (Soviet) to the new one required not only changes in documentation, policies, and laws. The system transfer required a change of thinking and perception of university professors and leaders. Kazakhstan has introduced new quality assurance practices, developed national accreditors, and established registers for accredited institutions and programs. These developments have enhanced the quality of education and influenced state funding and academic mobility.

In Kazakhstan, accreditation agencies must demonstrate compliance with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Standards and Guidelines before recognition by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science. Agencies meeting these standards can join ENQA and be listed in the European Quality Assurance Register. (ENIC-

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Kazakhstan, n.d.). The ESG (2015) outlines the quality assurance standards for accreditation organizations and reflects the Bologna process's core commitment.

The current problem that universities face in Kazakhstan regarding quality assurance is the realization and implementation of external peer review proposals, recommendations for institutional quality improvement and integration with university planning. Accreditation is accepted as compliance with external standards and guidelines to have a certificate to be eligible for state grants and to demonstrate accountability. Current quality assurance practices in Kazakhstan are primarily regulated by national accreditation agencies, which often face limitations in terms of resources and expertise. There are plenty of studies discussing the challenges of accreditation, such as bureaucracy and extra workload to comply with external standards underestimating internal institutional improvement, lack of quality staff for internal quality assurance development, intervention of autonomy, and cost of the process (Zavale, 2022).

Literature Review

Classic scholars, Meyer and Rowan (1977) claimed that if quality management is introduced because of external pressures and requirements, like governmental regulations, the outcome will be inefficient and have nothing to do with internal organizational changes. According to them, HEI's values, behaviour and structure are shaped by an external environment. According to scholars in the field of management, management innovation is 'new organizational structures, administrative systems, and management practices' (Damanpour, 2014). Following, scholars of management studies pointed out that in light of external pressures, organizations' responsiveness and potential do not only depend on the introduction of new products or services but rather competition also promotes more technological changes and fosters to reconsider the organization's internal structures and management approaches (Vaccaro et al., 2012). The concept of 'management innovation' is a part of organization management addressing 'changes in what managers do and how they do it' (Hamel, 2006). By changing the way, the administration sets goals, makes decisions, and motivates employees. Management innovation enables enhanced effectiveness, and efficiency of the organization's internal activities, and improves productivity and competitiveness (Manarbek, 2021).

More than a decade has passed since quality assurance practices were introduced in the Kazakhstani higher education system, however, there are still challenges and quality issues managed not properly and ineffectively at the university governance level (Kerimkulova & Kuzhabekova, 2017). Accreditation is an external quality assurance tool employed through external peer review of institutions and programmes to account to the government and society about what universities have done, whereas internal quality assurance deals with the voluntary activity of all university constituencies towards quality improvement through internal institutional assessment of activities (Sánchez-Chaparro et al., 2022). Some scholars believe that accreditation is solely compliance with standards and guidelines and there is no room for internal improvement of an institution (Saunders, 2007; Murray, 2009). However, an internal university assessment is an integral part of a quality assurance system in higher education (Ferreira, 2014). The effectiveness of quality assurance practices is guaranteed when accreditation outcomes are integrated with the

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overall internal quality evaluation procedures of an institution. Two sides of quality assurance require a periodic and systematic commitment of all the university's internal and external participants to achieve the desired outcome. Unfortunately, this integration is not working effectively in Kazakhstani institutions. In most cases, universities seek accreditation because of state grants and quantitative indicators, and the outcomes of accreditation are underestimated to be utilized for future institutional planning, improvement, and development activities.

Building on this understanding, the present research paper examines quality assurance practices in the U.S., focusing on the implications of U.S. approaches for Kazakhstan. This is particularly important as Kazakhstan's higher education management seeks to internationalize its higher education system and be able to compete in the global educational and labour markets (Perryer & Egan, 2015).

By analyzing accreditation practices in the U.S. and exploring quality evaluation documents of accreditation agencies, the paper aims to provide new insights and knowledge to enhance quality assurance practices in Kazakhstan. Given that the ESG 2015 have not been updated since 2015, this research highlights the necessity of introducing changes to the current quality assurance standards.

To further illustrate this point, this research paper is highly relevant and original, as it addresses a significant gap in the literature by providing a comparative analysis of quality assurance practices between the U.S. and Kazakhstan, a topic that has not been extensively explored in existing studies. The idea of studying U.S. quality assurance practices and bringing insights on institutional assessment and continuous improvement is because the European accreditation landscape is considered to be a "maze," pointing to the complexity and variation across countries, advocating for greater harmonization to facilitate cross-border recognition of qualifications (Flasdick, J., Michel, L.P. & Legait, A., 2006). This contrasts with the relatively more standardized and coherent U.S. system (Eaton, 2004). However, discussions on the extent to which European accreditation practices are moving towards the U.S. model are characterized by extensive peer review and self-assessment practices. While some U.S. elements are being adopted, the European system still maintains a distinct emphasis on external accountability (Stensaker, 2011).

There is a substantial amount of literature that explores the comparative perspective of quality assurance practices in different countries. For instance, Stanley and Patrick (1998) conducted a comparative study of higher education quality assurance systems between the U.S. and Britain. In the same manner, Alderman (2005) contrasts the U.S. and UK approaches, noting that the U.S. system leans towards institutional autonomy and improvement, whereas the UK system prioritizes regulatory compliance. On the other hand, Khaled Alzafari and Jani Ursin's (2019) research takes a broader view, encompassing quality assurance practices of multiple European countries, offering a more generalised view. Another study extends this scope even further by including European and non-European countries (U.S. and Canada) and providing comprehensive cross-continental recommendations that highlight the best approaches and areas for improvement in quality assurance practices in a global context and quality evaluation policies (Bernhard, 2012; Bejan et al., 2015). In addition to these discussions, another group of scholars brings another layer of analysis by incorporating strategic perspectives on legislative and operational aspects of quality assurance agencies in three European countries, offering practical insights

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into their implementation and effectiveness. This explains how different countries' legislative environments impact quality assurance practices (Damian et al., 2016). Given this context, each study contributes uniquely to the understanding of quality assurance practices, with varying degrees of specificity, breadth, and practical application in a comparative context. As a ground for the present research paper, another systematic literature review on quality assurance in higher education identifies key issues related to institutions, processes, and stakeholders, and proposes solutions focusing on the significance of attitude changes, policy adjustments, and process improvements. However, it underscores the absence of a dependable framework for constructing an effective information system to support quality assurance efforts (Pushpakumara et al., 2023).

In light of these observations, the comparative analysis of the implementation of quality management practices in higher education from perspectives of the U.S. and international institutions demonstrates the importance and relevance of studying U.S. practices and integrating these into the quality assurance practices in Kazakhstan (Grant et al., 2004). The US accreditation system, with its focus on institutional self-assessment and peer review, aims to foster ongoing enhancement of quality education (Stensaker & Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Williams, 2010). Importantly, Rhoades and Sporn (2002) compare quality assurance practices in Europe and the U.S., highlighting how professional and political-economic factors shape higher education policies in both regions. They find that the U.S. tends to emphasize market-driven approaches and accountability, while Europe focuses on harmonization and collaboration through frameworks like the Bologna Process. The study suggests that European policies are more influenced by collective agreements and state interventions. Romanowski and Karkouti (2024) explore the functions of the U.S. accreditation system and define the US accreditation process as an external quality evaluation for universities and programmes, assessing educational institutions across various academic disciplines. Zabiiaka et al. (2023) explore innovative quality assurance practices from various countries, emphasizing the importance of international collaboration and the adoption of the best practices. They argue that integrating foreign experiences can help local institutions improve their quality assurance systems and better respond to global educational challenges.

The comparative analysis of these studies reveals several common patterns, such as the emphasis on continuous improvement, stakeholder involvement, and the need for standardization. However, significant differences also emerge, particularly regarding the balance between regulatory compliance and institutional autonomy, and the adoption of U.S. models in Europe. By synthesizing these insights, we can better understand how to enhance quality assurance practices in diverse contexts, including Kazakhstan. Adopting successful strategies from the U.S. while addressing local challenges will be crucial for improving quality assurance practices in Kazakhstani higher education. Consequently, the core of the paper lies in the analysis of U.S. accreditation agencies' quality evaluation documents, granted to the fact that the U.S. quality assurance practices influence European quality assurance models. Previous research by Rhoades and Sporn (2002) also investigated 'the differences and similarities' between European and US approaches in quality assurance of higher education, which serves as the foundation for this research paper (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). Kazakhstani institutions can leverage quality assurance practices in light of the

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shift to non-profit organizations and practice more academic, managerial and financial freedom by adopting the U.S. market-driven model of governance.

The studies collectively highlight that while quality assurance in higher education is evolving, it faces ongoing challenges related to complexity, variability, and cross-border integration. European approaches tend to emphasize harmonization and collaboration, while U.S. practices focus on decentralization and market-driven mechanisms. Moreover, European quality assurance systems can be complex and bureaucratic, potentially leading to administrative burdens for institutions (Haug, 2003). Kazakhstan as a part of the European Quality Assurance Framework and adhering to its standards and guidelines, experiences the same complexity and external accountability focus. Therefore, adopting U.S. practices, which focus on institutional assessment and continuous improvement, is crucial for enhancing the existing quality assurance practices in Kazakhstan.

Summing up, the comparative studies have been instrumental in highlighting the differences and similarities between quality assurance practices in the U.S. and other international contexts. The study aims to generate new insights into quality assurance practices in Kazakhstan, with a particular emphasis on a comparative perspective, which is relatively underrepresented in literature. Consequently, this research seeks to address the following questions:

RQ 1: What are the primary characteristics of quality assurance practices in higher education within the U.S. and Kazakhstan?

RQ2: How do the quality documents of US regional accreditation organizations emphasize regular internal evaluation and assessment procedures?

RQ 3: How can the practical and managerial aspects of current accreditation practices in Kazakhstan be enhanced by adopting a U.S. quality assurance perspective?

Quality Assurance Practices in Kazakhstan and the U.S.

Accreditation Practices in the United States

The pioneers of accreditation practices were the United States, when it emerged as a voluntary process (El-Khawas, 2001; Phillips & Kinser 2018). In the U.S. higher education institutions, quality assurance is implemented through internal institutional assessment and evaluation procedures, positively affecting the overall quality enhancement practices of education. Before the accreditation process of an institution or programme, the U.S. institutions perform an internal institutional assessment or internal programme review to identify the main drawbacks and develop an action plan to eliminate them.

The U.S. accreditation mainly focuses on self-assessment and peer-review processes to assure academic quality and accountability of universities and programmes. In 1996 the presidents of colleges and universities developed the Council for Higher Education Accreditation by a referendum. The purpose of this establishment was to have an independent non-governmental organization to regulate accreditation practices in the U.S. and to promote the autonomy of universities through quality assurance and accountability practices. There are four types of accrediting organizations, recognized for the accreditation

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of universities and programmes in the U.S.: national faith-related accreditors, national career-related accreditors, regional accreditors and programme accreditors*.

Table 1.
Types of accrediting organizations in the U.S.

Accreditation entities	Direction
Regional (7 organizations)	Accredit public and private, mainly nonprofit and degree-granting, two- and four-year institutions
National faith-related (4 organizations)	Accredit religiously affiliated or doctrinally based institutions, mainly nonprofit and degree-granting
National career-related (7 accrediting organizations)	Accredit mainly for-profit, career-based, single-purpose institutions, including distance learning colleges and universities
Programmatic accreditors (degree and by non-degree)	Accredit specific programmes, professions or schools, e.g., law, medicine, engineering and health professions.

Moving forward, the focus of CHEA objectives is recognition of institutions, education and professional development of accreditors, academic, administrative and professional community, advocacy of quality and international collaboration (CHEA, n.d.). The essential part of the U.S. accreditation system is that CHEA is responsible for overseeing and recognizing transparency, openness, and compliance of accrediting organizations with CHEA standards and policies. The most reliable source for the public, and external stakeholders, such as employers, parents and students is the database of CHEA, which provides information about the accreditation status of institutions and programmes in the USA. The status of university and programme accreditation is important for employers as well. Apart from the evaluation of credentials of job applicants based on an accreditation of the graduated university or programme, employers can also decide whether to support tuition fees for their current employees seeking additional education. Eventually, the federal government of the U.S. identifies accreditation as an indicator of the academic quality of institutions and programmes.

The importance of Recognition of accrediting organizations in the U.S. is the evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of accreditors. Two main bodies carry out Recognition: CHEA (the goal of which is to assure accrediting bodies commit to preserving and improving academic quality) and the Department of Education of the U.S. (USDE - the goal of which is to assure accrediting bodies contribute to the effective use of federal and state funds). The process of recognition of accrediting organizations by the CHEA and the USDE is an essential element of U.S. accreditation adding value to the public by 'accrediting accreditors'.

A Brief Overview of Quality Assurance Development in Kazakhstan

The European standards for quality assurance consist of internal and external quality assurance procedures. Every accreditation agency recognized by the ENQA should have standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance. The database on accreditors, accredited institutions and programmes in the European Higher Education Area is the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). The main objective of the EQAR is to provide stakeholders, and society with reliable and objective information about agents responsible

* Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA): https://www.chea.org/

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for quality assurance (ENQA, n.d.). There are 12 accrediting organizations in Kazakhstan recognized by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, half of them are foreign accreditation bodies (ENIC-Kazakhstan, n.d.). Accrediting organizations in Kazakhstan are not divided by programme or institutional accreditation, like in the U.S. Any recognized accrediting organization is eligible to accredit a university and programme according to their standards developed in compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines. The ESG recommends that each institution have an internal quality assurance system. However, in the case of Kazakhstani universities, the internal quality assurance is interpreted and implemented variously differing from one institution to another. The administration and managers of the institutions and accreditation departments interpret it as having a policy document for quality assurance (indeed, they do have), clearly stating the mission, and objectives of the university. The standard requires the development of a quality culture and engagement of all institution constituencies in quality assurance processes. Following, the standard says that 'how the policy is implemented, monitored and revised is the institution's decision'. Thus, the realization mechanism of the policy on quality assurance is challenging. It is important to emphasize that the ESG has a standard on 'continuous improvement and periodic review of programmes', however, the standard deals only with programme improvement. On the other hand, the study of standards and policies of U.S. regional accreditation agencies revealed another side of assessment which deals not only with a programme review but with an institutional evaluation as well.

Foreign accreditation is a common practice in Kazakhstan, it is an international experience and an international peer review, which brings new insights and boundaries to the improvement of programmes from perspectives of foreign assessment. (Salto, 2021). Extending this argument, a comparative overview of the quality assurance system in Kazakhstan and the U.S. is provided in Table. 2.

Table 2.
The comparative analysis of the U.S. and Kazakhstani quality assurance practices

	Kazakhstan	The U.S.
Recognizing body	ENQA – European network for quality assurance	CHEA (Committee for Higher education accreditation/ Department of Education)
Established	2000	1996
	Standards and Guidelines for Quality assurance in EHEA (2015)	CHEA Standards and Procedures for Recognition (2021)
Aim	To represent interests of QA agencies, to provide services to members, to promote external QA	Non-independent body to oversee accreditation
How is the system organized	ENQA was first established in 2000 as the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education to promote European cooperation in the field of quality assurance in higher education. In 2004, it became the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education with the aim to contribute	Autonomous, non-governmental, non-profit Emerged from HE, not form government Legitimacy comes from HE, not from government More that 100 years old

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The reason for creation of accreditation	in the framework of Bologna process and ENQA, government initiated accreditation	Accreditation is an outgrowth of higher education, not government
Funding	No information is provided at the website	Fees from HEIs and programmes for accreditation Financial aid from sponsors Some funds from government and private foundations for special initiatives
Types of accrediting bodies	Accreditation agencies	National career-related National faith-related Regional Programmatic
Peers	Peers + Employers, students	Peers + Team members (consisting of non-academics, who have an interest in HE, who are volunteers and do not get compensation).
Periodic external review	External review every five years	review over time on cycles from every few years to every 10 years. Universities and programmes prepare self-study and undergo a site visit each time.
The role of accreditation to Society and Government	The indicator of quality education Access to governmental funding Enhancement of academic mobility between ENQA member institutions The basis for the distribution of state grants	Quality assurance for students and public Access to federal and state funds Easy transfer of credits The source for decisions of private sector like corporations, individuals and foundations to support higher education: tuition aid/funding, sponsorship, fund raising, charitable giving, research funding The basis for information and confidence about status of HEIs in the US.
Understanding of accreditation	Accreditation is an external tool of quality assurance	Accreditation is about quality assurance and quality improvement
How is quality of accreditors assured?	Ministry of Education and Science	Through recognition based on a set of standards: CHEA and USDE
Total organizations	12	80
Recognition procedure	Four stages: analytical self-assessment report, site-visit, compliance report by peers, follow-up the review outcomes	Self-assessment based on standards, site-visit and report, award of recognition status
Switching accreditors	Common practice	Uncommon practice

The interesting point is that if CHEA-recognized accreditation organizations do not accredit the institution or programmes, the decision for funding and compliance with Title IV (financial aid programmes for postsecondary students authorized under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 administered by the U.S. Department of Education) depends on the external review by the Department of Education (Title IV, n.d.). In this part, it is worth

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noting that an external review by the Department of Education is to ensure that accrediting organizations evaluate institutions on the possibility of federal fund management. Whereas, CHEA-recognized accrediting bodies assess the institution and programme performance on academic quality.

Thus, the paper aims to investigate the common existence of institutional internal evaluation and assessment issues in quality evaluation documents.

Methodology

The objective of this paper is to examine the quality documents of accreditation organisations in the U.S. and justify the importance of institutional internal evaluation and assessment procedures to enhance overall quality assurance practices institutions using a content-based conceptual analysis (Luo, 2022). The primary sources of research for secondary external data are derived from the standards of regional accreditation agencies in the US, recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (Polonsky & Waller, 2019). To achieve this objective, the paper employs a descriptive data analysis and a systemic approach focusing on regular assessment and continuous improvement procedures within the framework of accreditation practices. Only publicly and openly available quality evaluation documents were used, therefore eliminating the need for permissions from the accreditation organizations. Seven documents, all in English were analyzed.

We created a database encompassing the guidelines of the U.S. regional accreditors for institutional assessment and evaluation procedures as integral parts of each standard and criterion. Data were collected from the Database of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in the U.S. (n.d.) and the official websites of the respective accreditation organizations. The collected data were then analyzed using a qualitative content analysis based on the predefined criteria (Ferreira et al., 2014). The goal was to determine whether specific information was included concerning each standard and criterion.

A content-based analysis was adopted to gain deeper insight into quality criteria and standard documents of accreditors in the U.S., providing a detailed understanding of internal assessment and evaluation practices exercised by higher education institutions through accreditation (Krippendorff, 2004). The aim was not to critically assess the quality documents of the accreditors but rather to provide a comprehensive illustration of these documents focusing on internal evaluation practices. To maintain simplicity, the quality evaluation documents from regional accreditation organisations were coded by alphabetical letters from A to G (Table. 3).

Table 3.
The quality evaluation documents of regional accreditation organizations in the US

Code	Accreditation Organizations
A	Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
B	Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACCJC)
C	Higher Learning Commission (HLC)
D	New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE)
E	Southern Association of College and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)

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F	WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)
G	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU, 2020)

We summarized the documents based on the frequency of quality assurance-related keywords, which were categorized under two main topics: regular assessment and continuous improvement procedures. To code the analysis, the conceptional method has been applied. The major keywords identified included:

- Periodic, Regular Assessment, Evaluation, Institutional Review: Periodic review, periodic assessment, assessment, regular review, institutional review, systematic evaluation, evaluation, programme review, regular evaluation, periodic evaluation, systematic continuous assessment, assessment, regular assessment, review, institutional evaluation, systematic review, institutional research, periodic analysis, ongoing evaluation.
- Institutional Development, Continuous Improvement, Effective Planning: Institutional development, Institutional improvement, effectiveness improvement, effectiveness, systematic planning, institutional effectiveness, institutional planning, regular improvement, systematic improvement, improvement, continuous improvement, planning.

The findings from the content analysis, as shown in Figure 1, highlight the emphasis placed on periodic internal institutional assessment practices used in the evaluation processes by the U.S. accreditors (Ferreira et al., 2014).

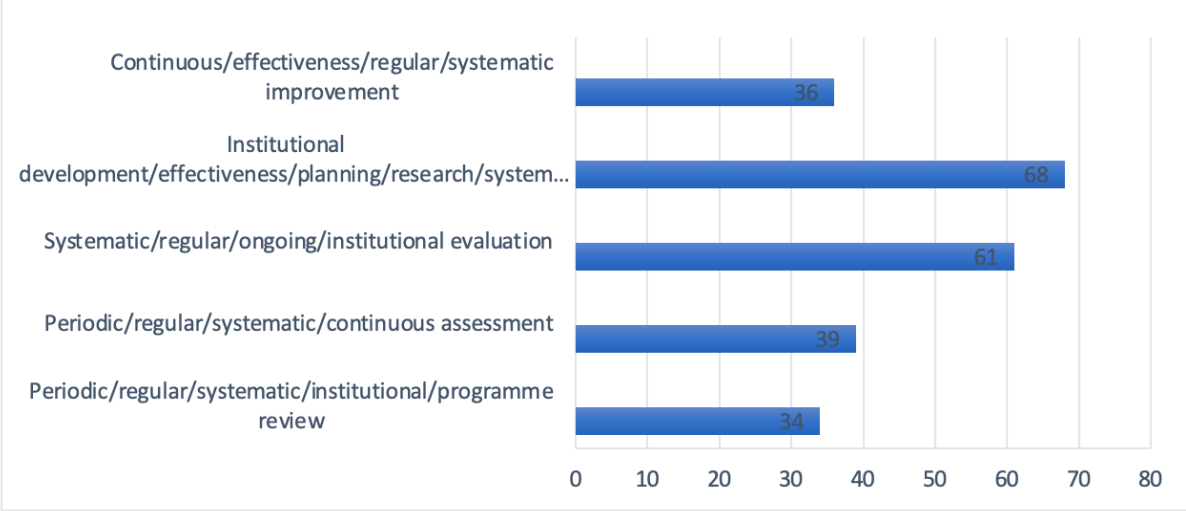

Figure 1. The frequency of quality assurance-related keywords in studied documents

We applied the method of correlation analysis to carry out the study of the characteristics, and to identify relationships between various indicators. This analytical tool allows us not only to determine the degree of dependence between variables but also to identify possible trends and patterns that may affect the phenomena under study.

In this analysis, we considered the correlation significance for the above-mentioned 5 groups (1-5). According to the study, the greatest relationship (over 70%) was found between the following indicators: *review and planning, planning and evaluation, review and*

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evaluation, improvement and evaluation, and improvement and planning. This in its turn means the respective change in the values of one indicator contributes to the trend of changes in the next. This relationship highlights the importance of considering these indicators as a whole and can provide valuable information about the impact of some aspects on others in the context of the analysis.

To illustrate, the highest level of correlation found between *review and planning* is 0.96. This value indicates a very strong positive linear relationship between the two variables "review" and "planning". Such a strong correlation may indicate that changes in one variable predict changes in another variable quite reliably.

A strong relationship was also found between the *planning and evaluation* indicators, with a correlation coefficient value of 0.85. This suggests that the increased emphasis on *planning* is accompanied by positive changes in *performance evaluation*. Similarly, there is a high level of correlation between the indicators *review and evaluation*, amounting to 0.84.

The findings of an analysis conclude that a more intensive focus on the aspects of *review and planning* leads to a positive impact on both *improvement and evaluation* indicators. These results highlight the importance of careful *planning and review* processes, as they can have a significant impact on an overall evaluation of university performance and quality excellence. The lowest levels of correlation can be observed between *assessment and evaluation* (0.19) and *assessment and improvement*. These results indicate that there is little relationship between *assessment and evaluation*, and between *assessment and improvement*. That is, changes in one of these indicators are poorly predictable to changes in another indicator. This may indicate that these aspects may be dependent on other factors or may have more complex relationships requiring further study to fully understand their impact on *evaluation and improvement* (Table. 4).

Table 4.
The correlation analysis of keywords used in quality evaluation documents.

	1	2	3	4	5
1	1				
2	0,848506506	1			
3	0,750204624	0,72911703	1		
4	0,839494549	**0,96426218**	0,68739682	1	
5	0,197894297	0,56389484	0,23722816	0,55751888	1

We carried out a correlation analysis in relation to keywords used in quality evaluation documents of US accreditation entities as well (Appendix 1: Online Supplement). The correlation analysis for these keywords allows a deeper understanding of the relationship between indicators considered important in the assessment and accreditation of universities. This can shed light on those terms that are most related to each other, which in turn can provide valuable information to optimize the accreditation process and ensure the quality of higher education.

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Results and Discussion

Significantly, the current research paper has analyzed the standards and guidelines of U.S. accreditors recognized by the CHEA to propose a content-based framework for Kazakhstani educators and managers to improve and promote internal institutional assessment within universities to enhance the quality of education and to effectively employ results of accreditation reports through continuous improvement and institutional assessment. One more similarity between Kazakhstani and the U.S. practice of accreditation is quality assurance is realized as a self-regulatory activity organized by non-governmental organizations.

The discussion and analysis of quality evaluation practices in both the United States and Kazakhstan (as a representative of the European quality assurance framework) provide valuable insights into the quality assurance mechanisms of the Kazakhstani education system. First, by studying accreditation practices in both countries, we could compare the strengths and weaknesses of each system. This comparison can highlight innovative approaches, best practices, and areas for improvement. Secondly, understanding accreditation practices in a different context (U.S.) can inform and support policymakers in developing and enhancing accreditation policies in Kazakhstan, as well as leverage successful strategies to improve the quality of education and adapt them to local needs. Moreover, as the world becomes increasingly interconnected, studying different accreditation practices can foster international collaboration in higher education and can be beneficial for Kazakhstan to enhance existing accreditation standards to facilitate the recognition of qualifications across borders. Next, it is a common practice, when employers often rely on accreditation status as a measure of the quality of education received by job applicants, thus the U.S. practice could open new horizons and perspectives for local graduates in terms of further education and employment. In terms of economic development, a well-functioning accreditation system can enable graduates to possess skills and knowledge needed in the workforce, as well as new practices can be beneficial for policymakers to develop strategies to align education with economic needs. Following this line of thought, the research findings have revealed the following framework regarding the importance of internal institutional assessment of institutions (Appendix 2: Online Supplement)

The study of the criteria of the quality standards disclosed the importance of an institutional assessment, development, and collaborative participation of external and internal stakeholders in defining the mission and goals of the university. The periodic assessment of the mission and goals of an institution to ensure relevance and achievability has been highlighted in documents of accreditation agencies such as MSCHE (2015), ACCJC (2014), and NECHE (2020).

As for ethics and integrity, the must-have attributes of the university are ensuring a favourable and equal environment for students, faculty, staff, and administration from a range of diverse backgrounds, ideas, and perspectives. A periodic assessment of policies, processes, practices on ethics and integrity, and mechanism of implementation are encompassed in quality requirement policies of accreditation organizations like MSCHE, NECHE and WSCUC (2013).

The quality and appropriateness of faculty staff as well as methods of teaching and learning are subject to a regular and fair review. All accreditors describe the necessity and

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significance of a periodic assessment of student learning programmes, design and delivery of student achievements and services, and the periodic review of degree programmes in compliance with the market. The demonstration of an internal institutional review and periodic assessment of student experience support practices is highlighted. The methods of students' learning outcomes and achievement evaluation are to be subject to periodic assessment and institutional review by external third parties to ensure adequate and fair evaluation practices of educational effectiveness.

As shown in Appendix 3 (Online Supplement), the findings of the content-based analysis illustrate the importance of the institutions' systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of management, planning and allocation of the university's financial, human, and technical resources required to support the institution's mission and goals. The quality standards of accreditors such as MSCHE, ACCJC, HLC (2022), NECHE and WSCUC require the utility of the findings of a systematic evaluation as the basis for the university's improvement.

Apart from the requirement of accreditors to have an institutional systematic assessment of each aspect of institutions' activities, the policy covers a separate specific standard to be developed at institutions for an institutional assessment of effectiveness and planning. An institutional assessment regularly must be integrated with the institution's overall management, quality assurance and all other aspects of the institution's activities as stated in accreditors' policies. The policy on educational effectiveness requires the periodic assessment of the effectiveness of university governance, leadership, and administration to ensure the realization of the university mission and goals in a way that effectively benefits the institution, students, faculty-administrative staff, and external stakeholders. This statement has been described in the quality standards of quality organizations such as MSCHE, ACCJC, NECHE, SACSCOC (2009), and WSCUC.

A key point to emphasize is every single standard encompasses the provision of an internal institutional assessment of university activities in all directions regularly (Figure 2).

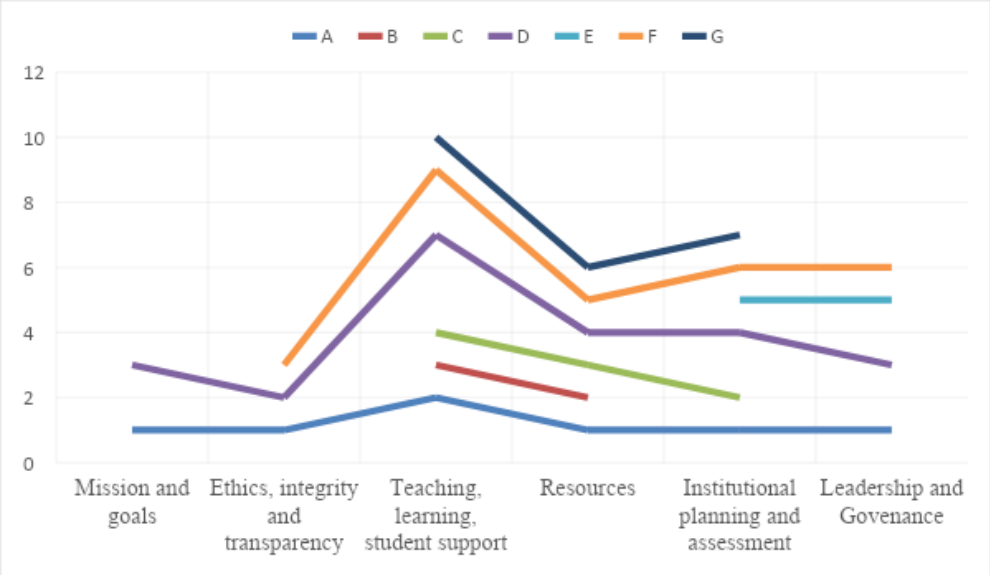

Figure 2. The frequency of studied keywords in each standard of quality evaluation documents

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QA in Kazakhstan: Lessons from U.S.

The qualitative content analysis of quality evaluation documents provided the following insights: the terms related to periodic assessment (e.g., periodic review, systematic evaluation, institutional research) appeared frequently across all documents, indicating a strong emphasis on regular assessment practices. Keywords related to continuous improvement (e.g., institutional development, systematic planning, effectiveness improvement) were also prevalent, reflecting the ongoing commitment to enhancing institutional quality.

All accrediting bodies incorporate a systematic approach to quality assurance, ensuring that institutions engage in regular self-evaluation and external review practices. This approach enables to identify areas for improvement and to develop the right and effective strategies for development.

The findings of the research demonstrate the significant importance of the internal assessment and institutional improvement processes highlighted by the standards of U.S. accreditors. The main gap that today Kazakhstani institutions are facing with quality assurance practices is the lack of internal quality improvement procedures based on a systematic institutional assessment before accreditation procedures.

The most obvious finding in all cases of study is that Kazakhstani quality evaluation documents recommend institutions to develop their own internal quality assurance practices, whereas the U.S. documents recommend conducting a periodic review and systematic evaluation of all areas of university activities, which in turn affect positively on overall quality assurance performance by default. Obviously, the findings of the study may help quality managers to reconsider current existing quality assurance practices, integrate the findings of accreditation with overall internal periodic review and evaluation procedures and systematically assess university activities.

In summary, the findings from the content analysis underscore the importance of regular assessment and continuous improvement in U.S. quality assurance practices. These practices not only ensure compliance with accreditation standards but also foster a culture of excellence and accountability within higher education institutions. The current paper advocates for a reevaluation of existing quality assurance practices within Kazakhstani higher education, particularly concerning accreditation agency recognition guidelines. Finally, the research paper justifies the stated research questions:

The quality documents of U.S. regional accreditation organizations place significant emphasis on regular internal evaluation and assessment procedures, highlighting their importance in maintaining quality education, ongoing improvement and institutional effectiveness. Aligning outcome-based assessments with accreditation practices can help shift the focus from mere procedural compliance and accountability to an improvement of quality education and institutions' performance.

Continuous improvement practices, as detailed in the standards of U.S. regional accreditation organizations, are characterized by systematic planning and institutional development, ensuring ongoing enhancement of programmes and institutional performance. Adopting a systematic approach to continuous improvement, as emphasized in U.S. standards, can drive ongoing enhancement of programmes and institutions n Kazakhstan. This would involve regular internal evaluations, systematic planning, and strategic resource allocation to support continuous development.

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The practical and managerial aspects of current accreditation practices in Kazakhstan can be enhanced by adopting the U.S. quality assurance perspective by establishing an independent non-profit organization aimed to coordinate quality assurance practices. This organization would ensure consistency and reliability in accreditor recognition, similar to how the CHEA operates in the U.S.

The findings indicate the importance of practical implications of internal institutional assessment practices to make accreditation work for the quality of education, rather than for accountability. Drawing from the U.S. experience, a key lesson to improve quality assurance practices in Kazakhstani higher education is to strengthen internal assessment practices and emphasize the importance of internal institutional evaluations for continuous improvement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examined U.S. accreditation documents to highlight the significance of internal evaluation and assessment procedures in improving quality assurance in higher education. The analysis found that U.S. accreditors emphasize periodic assessments and continuous improvement, as reflected in frequent mentions of relevant terms in evaluation documents. The conceptual method applied in the content analysis identified a comprehensive set of terms associated with a periodic review and continuous improvement, demonstrating a systematic approach to institutional evaluation. These practices are integral to preserving the quality of education and enhancing institutional effectiveness. While the U.S. quality assurance practices benefit from robust financial and infrastructural support, this analysis also underscored the importance of effective resource allocation in implementing these practices. The consistent emphasis on planning and systematic improvement suggests that institutions are encouraged to allocate resources strategically to support ongoing evaluation and enhancement activities. In comparison to Kazakhstani practices, which can be more fragmented due to regulatory complexity and less emphasis on outcomes, the U.S. practices demonstrate a more decentralized and outcome-focused approach.

Consequently, the research recommends the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan reconsider the current quality assurance practices and the guidelines for recognizing accreditation agencies.

Additionally, the creation of an independent non-profit organization in Kazakhstan to coordinate accreditation activities, oversee accreditation agencies, and provide ongoing training and development for quality managers in higher education institutions would further enhance quality assurance practices. This organization would function similarly to the CHEA ensuring a robust and effective quality assurance framework in Kazakhstan.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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Human Participants

This research does not contain any studies with human and animal participants.

Originality Note

The authors confirm that the research is their original work and that proper citations are provided for referenced materials.

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Dr. Gulden Manarbek holds PhD in Innovation Management. She is an Acting associate professor at the Department of Management, Higher School of Economics and Business at al-Farabi Kazakh National University. Gulden Manarbek conducts courses in Master's and PhD degree programmes in Management and Innovation Management. Her research interests are quality management, quality assurance, innovation management, leadership and DEI in higher education. Her current research project is focused on studying the impact of institutional research practices on higher education quality management in the context of effective data-driven decision-making.

Dr. Saltanat Kondybayeva is Associate Professor and Deputy Head of the Department of Economics for Scientific Innovation and International Relations at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Kazakhstan. She teaches courses in the Master's programme in Economics. Dr. Kondybayeva is the project manager of the research project focused on the study of the impact of higher education quality on the competitiveness of the national economy in the era of digitalization and technological change. She has articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals in the areas of labor market, knowledge economy, and quality of higher education.

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