PERCEPTION OF QUALITY
IN CHANGING UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTAN

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This study is designed to describe the perception of quality in higher education from both administrative and student perspectives in Kazakhstan. The descriptive qualitative method is used in this research. The purpose of this study is to understand the criteria for university quality during educational reforms in Kazakhstan. The research found limited public access to information in higher education. Besides, it questions the validity of the information, and analyzes the generational difference in attitudes of the participants as well as the differences in perception of quality at upper administrative, institutional and student levels. Furthermore, it defines the major obstacles in educational reform such as mentality of the older generation as well as corruption, lack of academic and financial resources, ignorance of a student voice, limited institutional autonomy, a low salary rate of faculty, lack of practical knowledge, absence of focus on student learning outcomes, and limited academic freedom.

Key words: perception of quality, quality assessment, higher education, educational reforms, Kazakhstan, changes in university education;
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Introduction

This research will describe the criteria for university quality in the Republic of Kazakhstan and their role in higher education reforms in the country. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, education has become a major concern in Kazakhstan. During the 17 years of its independence, Kazakhstan focused on educating professionals in world class universities in 25 developed countries of the world through the program “Presidential International Scholarship – Bolashak” (“Bolashak” in the Kazakh language means the “Future”) (CIP, 2009). In 2004 with the order of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Committee on Control of Education and Science was established. The Committee functions in attestation of education, implementation of government education projects, control of education, licensing the educational institutions, intermediate government control (of higher education institutions through the process of testing the undergraduate students), attestations of faculty and researchers, and establishing international partnerships. Next, the strategic planning on reforms of education the “State-Run Education Development Program to be implemented in the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2005-2010,” was developed (Kazakhstan Government, 2009); the National Accreditation Center (NAC) of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan was founded in 2005 as a part of the implementation of the State Run Education Development Program 2005-2010 (NAC, 2009). NAC works on accreditation of higher education institutions, registration and acceptance of diplomas received at foreign universities, and ranking of higher education institutions. The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan developed the Strategic Plan on
Education 2020 in terms of improving the quality of education in elementary and secondary as well as higher education levels (Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Kazakhstan, 2009). In 2008 an Independent Quality Assurance Agency (IQAA) emerged in the field and within the period of a year worked on assessment and evaluation as well as ranking of universities in Kazakhstan (IQAA, 2009).

Today, the Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Kazakhstan is looking forward to joining the Bologna Process. The field experts consider that higher educational institutions in Kazakhstan will meet the world standards by modernizing educational institutions based on the European higher education standards (Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Kazakhstan, 2009). Although a number of programs have been established to develop the education system in Kazakhstan, the higher education institutions have not been able to meet the world standards; none of the higher education institutions in Kazakhstan has received international accreditation (Kazakhstan Today, 2009). Both public and private universities are not able to prepare internationally competent professionals; the majority of the problems are lack of research and funding, lack of academic resources such as textbooks, labs, technology, and world class faculty in Kazakh universities (Nurseit, 2009). A professor of Kazakh National University, Dr. Tulembayeva states that the stability of the economy in the Republic of Kazakhstan depends on investment in education (Tulembayeva, 2009). By preparing globally competent specialists, Kazakhstan will start producing goods instead of exporting raw materials for cheap prices. The production of goods and employment of high quality specialists will raise the economic and social conditions of the country. Dr. Tulembayeva
believes that education should become the priority of the Republic of Kazakhstan since it is the key factor in overcoming the economic crises of the country. To educate globally competent professionals, the higher education institutions in Kazakhstan should first meet the requirements of world standards. To achieve academic recognition, both the government of Kazakhstan and higher education institutions are interested in establishing quality education. Thus, the researcher concentrates on defining the criteria for university quality and ways of achieving it.

The education system in the Republic of Kazakhstan was based on the Soviet Union system until 1991. Along with political and socio-economic changes in the country, education reform has emerged. Prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, the structure of higher education had been organized into 5 years of a Specialist Degree, 3-5 years of Aspirantura (equivalent of US PhD) and Doctoral Degree: 5-10 years or even a lifelong study (Postdoctoral Degree) In 2004 the education system changed into bachelor’s degree (4 year education), master’s degree (2 year education), PhD degree (3-4 year education), and specialist degree (5-6 year education). In 2007 the law of education of the Republic of Kazakhstan confirmed the new structure of this higher education system (Tuimebaev, 2009). In the Soviet Union system of education, higher education institutions focused mainly on teaching and did not engage in research. As a consequence, the majority of higher education institutions in Kazakhstan are still geared toward teaching and not research (International Information Center for the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2009). Today, higher education institutions in Kazakhstan are working on establishing research centers and laboratories, promoting graduate education, as well as developing international
partnerships. The higher education structure within the universities in Kazakhstan, which still functions in the style of practiced during the times of the Soviet Union, differs from the Western European and the US higher education in terms of curriculum and academic culture: schools had a fixed curriculum, no choice of electives or scheduling, and students were grouped. The education system had more theoretical value rather than practical and institutions were teacher-centered rather than student-centered.

The government of Kazakhstan shows great interest in the Bologna Process. The Ministry of Education and Science, accreditation agencies NAC and IQAA as well the higher education institutions look forward to joining the Bologna Process (The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2009). One of the criteria that the Bologna Process highlights is quality assurance. To ensure European higher education, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education established the European Standards and Guidelines for both internal and external quality assurance within the higher education institutions (EAQAHE, 2005). The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan believes that by becoming a part of the Bologna Process and thereby providing academic and student mobility, implementing a credit hour system in higher education, as well as accepting European standards of higher education, the Kazakhstan higher education institutions will improve their quality (The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2009). While studying educational reform in the Republic of Kazakhstan after the Soviet Union collapsed, the question emerges: How do academicians/professionals in the field and students define university quality in Kazakhstan? The purpose of this study is to understand
the present criteria for quality of higher education institutions in Kazakhstan during the academic reforms.
The Review of the Literature

In 1992 the Republic of Kazakhstan began its reforms on education. After changing the system structurally to include bachelor’s, master’s, specialist, PhD degrees, professionals in higher education realized that universities lacked quality. The definition of university quality given by the professionals of higher education, students, and parents as well as employees varied. Some define quality as having technology and research labs, while others define quality as having international faculty at institutions of higher education. Many argue that the low quality of universities comes as a result of insufficient resources such as libraries, books, and qualified faculty. Therefore, one of the biggest concerns of the government of Kazakhstan and Kazakhstani higher education institutions became how to establish university quality, educate globally competent professionals and gain world recognition. A number of researchers all over the world studied quality assurance in higher education, categorized the types of quality assessment and argued the importance of it in the currently mobile world of academia. Professionals in higher education in the Republic of Kazakhstan will benefit by studying the challenges of defining university quality and difficulties in establishing quality assurance from researchers all over the world. They can analyze and define what can be applicable to the current situation in the country.

Understanding the Concept of Quality and Quality Assessment

Due to competitive pressure to achieve universal access, the assessment of higher education institutions became a major concern for the public. Koslowski (2006) studied the history of quality assessment and higher education institutions, when and where the
idea of assessing universities emerged. He suggests that the higher education institutions learn the assessment from industries. In industry, quality traditionally is viewed as both an essential and measurable aspect of a product or service and is achieved when expectations or requirements are met. The understanding of quality varies contextually in terms of products, service, and knowledge. The quality is usually defined or evaluated by customer satisfaction (Koslowski, 2006). Besides these criteria, Koslowski determined university quality by its outputs such as efficient use of resources and whether or not it produces competent, highly satisfied and employable graduates. Finally, he states that in industry quality is defined by the customer; however, management is responsible for the quality; and how quality can be improved. According to Koslowski, assessment in higher education institutions is an overarching theory rather than a measurable end-result. The quality of the process is when the professionals and the higher education institutions view the work as valuable, measurable, and improvable. Assessment is that tangible process of evolution with the purpose of improving quality. Thus, Koslowski defines assessment as one of many parts of evaluating quality. Next, Koslowski in his research analyzes types of quality and assessment in higher education. The types of quality are transcendent quality, manufacturing-based quality, product-based quality, value-based quality, and user-based quality. The types of assessment in higher education that he determines are guided self-assessment, intermediary conduct assessment, independent self-assessment, and student competencies-based assessment (Koslowski, 2006). Guided self assessment is based on peer review similar to business certification such as International Standards Organization: ISO 9000. Koslowski believes that the academic audit has become a
dominant model for institutional assessment in higher education. Through the independent self-assessment, higher education institutions assess the needs of customers, the process of education and results. The student competencies-based assessment focuses on the student learning outcomes in distance learning programs in higher education institutions. Koslowski was referring specifically to distance learning programs whereas other researchers studied traditional classroom learning assessment. Finally, Koslowski states that higher education institutions should learn methods of assessing quality from industry by inspiring leadership, being student oriented, continuously working on improvements, having transparency and accountability on an economic, global, and political scale.

De Weert (1990) considers that historical and socio-political factors play key roles in defining the quality of higher education. Moreover, the quality of higher education is defined externally rather than internally (De Weert, 1990). According to Bers (2008) the quality of higher education is defined by the learning outcomes of students. The institutions should develop assessments for students' learning outcomes to meet their mission and goals. As De Weert (1990) states, quality can be defined by accomplishing institutional goals. Clark (1997) analyzes the problems that can emerge as a result of ongoing institutional quality development. The institutions will face issues such as expansion of the student body, the offering of new courses, the establishment of new programs and how to find both financial and academic resources (Clark, 1997). In their research Patrick and Stanley (1998) state that the measures of quality in higher education are based on teaching and research indicators. They define the quality assurance as
encompassing the policies, the system, and the process oriented toward the improvement of teaching and learning in higher education institutions. Patrick and Stanley view quality assessment as an external evaluation.

Quality Assessment of Distance Learning

Due to the development of technology, higher education institutions, in Kazakhstan as well as abroad, offer distance learning programs. The areas within higher education institutions such as online education or distance learning programs, require evaluation and assessment for quality purposes. In their quality assessment of distance learning programs, Clarke, Butler, Schmidt-Hansen and Somerville (2004) identified three equal areas that are important for the quality assessment of distance learning programs: curriculum and its assessment, the handling of coursework and assignments, and liaison with the students (Clarke et al., 2004). Clarke et al., (2004) view assessment as an integral part of any type of degree. The motivation and support for the staff is a needed factor to improve the quality of distance learning. As online education becomes increasingly popular, the quality of it causes a debate. Online education encompasses learning via electronic-mails, the Internet, and multimedia in higher education (Zhao, 2003). Online education has advantages such as flexibility for learning time, and place, and adaptable pacing. It also results in a reduction of the costs of education as well as the enhancement of adoption of new programs. The quality of online education mainly depends on the teaching process and the effectiveness of online access (Zhao, 2003). The author describes the major problems of online education as follows:

- technical problems; problems of browsing
- lack of face-to-face communication
- technical delays in receiving feedback
- instructors being unable to monitor students
- limited interaction with the instructor and all the students in the classroom

(Zhao, 2003, p. 216)

The criteria for quality of online learning differ from the criteria for quality of traditional classroom learning. Zhao (2003, p. 217) maintains that students judge the quality of online learning according to the following criteria:

- whether the site can be easily navigated
- range of the site coverage
- detail of coverage of a topic
- correctness of information provided in this site
- design of the site.

Based on his studies in Australian higher education, the author defines additional criteria for assessment of online learning:

- compatibility of the browser
- extension of synchronous and asynchronous communication
- ability to conduct online assessment including self-assessment and surveys
- extensive online help (Zhao, 2003, p.217).

Finally, the researcher argues that quality assessment of online learning requires as much effort and management as traditional classroom learning.
**Quality Assessment in the Period of Change in Academic Culture**

Today, higher education institutions in Kazakhstan show interest in assessment of student learning outcomes. James (2003) studied the accounting standards and assessment of student learning outcomes in Australian higher education. Due to an increasing number of international students, a drop in public funding, as well as their attempts to prepare internationally competent specialists, Australian higher education institutions implemented a series of educational reforms in the 1990’s. The basis of new Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework is the federal government, state and territory governments, the Australian Qualification Framework, universities, and the Australian University Quality Agency. The federal government is responsible for the funding of universities and is considered to play a special role in the assessment of quality. The State and territory government’s responsibility is to receive applications for accreditation, and provide criteria for the university recognition within the state. The Australian Qualification Framework maintains a national and public register of higher education providers and accreditation agencies. The Australian universities are responsible for academic standards. They have autonomy over deciding how to grade, how to educate, what courses to offer and how to offer them. In short, they are self-assessing institutions. The Australian University Quality Agency focused on teaching and learning, administration, research, and assessment of higher education institutions. Recently, the Australian higher education quality assessment professionals have been discussing whether or not to move towards student learning outcomes (James, 2003).

In their research, Partington and Brown (1997) discuss quality assessment, the
nature of staff development and the relationship between quality assessment and staff in higher education, as well as their role in the changing culture of the Academy in the UK. The researchers study the major changes in higher education in the 1990s. These changes include increasing number and diversity of the student body, high expectations of quality by stakeholders, accountability of academic functions such as research and teaching, and emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness of management. All of these changes have emphasized staff development. Since the goal of quality assessment is to improve the quality of higher education, assessment and staff development are interrelated: the staff educates the students and quality assessment focuses on both teaching and learning outcomes.

As higher education became market-driven, it faced governmental and societal challenges to prove the value of educational performance. Therefore, higher education initiated quality assessment (Ponder 1999). The word quality is ambiguous; it is defined contextually taking into consideration the institutional culture, society, economy, and government regulations. Ponder conducted research on the higher education system of Hong Kong and studied the relevance of quality to institutional performance assessment in higher education. The author uses two scales to measure the quality of education: productivity-efficiency and cohesion. The productivity and efficiency scale evaluates the quantity or volumes of what the organization produces and the costs of operation. The cohesion scale reflects on interpersonal relationships, staff morale, team-building and sense of belonging. The study shows that the quality was absent in the dimension for effectiveness of institutional performance rating in Hong Kong higher education (Ponder,
Continuous Quality Improvement

Today, higher education institutions compete globally because of student mobility on an international scale. Therefore, universities concentrate on using available resources and quality assessment (Roffè, 1998). Roffè studies the conceptual problems of continuous quality improvement (CQI). In the UK, initially CQI was people-oriented. However, due to planning and quality control, CQI has become process-oriented. The author states that CQI comes from Japanese term *kaizen* which means “slow never-ending improvements in all aspects of life” (Roffè, 1998, p.74). He distinguishes traditional CQI from the modern one. The traditional CQI is the famous classic Western approach: spending large amounts of money on improving the quality and purchasing new technology. In the Japanese context CQI, or *kaizen*, is continuously making small steps to improve the existing system and equipment by people who manage or work in the system. The structural steps to this CQI or *kaizen* are as follows:

- defining the area of improvement
- analyzing and selecting appropriate problems
- identifying causes
- planning counter-measures
- implementing
- confirming the results

Higher education institutions face challenges in terms of adopting CQI methods.
Moreover, higher education institutions have individual approaches whereas business and industry focus on team-building in the process of using CQI methods. Next, values of completion dominate higher education in the UK, and the ability of citizens has become a national and international phenomenon. Students are becoming both customers and consumers (Roffe, 1998). Therefore, improving quality assessment becomes an essential issue.

**General Model of Quality Assessment**

Van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) analyze the general model of quality assessment in higher education. The researchers studied assessment systems and practices in the USA, the UK, France, Canada and the Netherlands. In the 1980s, the quality of higher education became a major point of discussion in some parts of the world such as the USA, Canada, and Western Europe. In 1984 the UK declared quality as a principal object for higher education. The authors suggest that, due to the rapid growth of the student population, emerging new fields of study, and the creation of departments and regional branches of higher education institutions, attention was centered on the quality of higher education. The researchers Van Vught and Westerheijden analyze the quality of higher education in the United States. Accreditation is the first process of quality assessment: it can be institutional or specialized (program specific). The second process is the internal institutional process of systemic review that assesses program quality and institutional decision-making. In Canada, assessment of higher education concentrates on market coordination and the level of institutional autonomy. After analyzing assessment systems in the USA, Canada, the UK and Western Europe, Van Vught and Westerheijden
describe the general model of higher education quality assessment as including:

- a managing agent for the quality assessment (coordinating the quality assessment system and acting independently from government politics and policies)
- a quality assessment system based on self-evaluation
- a mechanism of peer review and site visits of external experts
- reporting the results and experience as well as the methods used in the process;
- a relationship between the outcomes of quality assessment and governmental decisions based on the findings of higher education institutions

The researchers view these elements of assessment as essential for developing quality assessment in higher education.

**Quality Assurance in the Bologna Process and in Central Asia**

In 2003 the Ministers responsible for higher education of the Bologna Process countries along with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the European University Association, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, and the **European Student Information Bureau** agreed on developing a set of standards, procedures and guidelines concerning quality assurance. In 2005 the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education presented new standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area (Bologna, 2009). There are three types of standards:

- European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance of higher
education institutions: policy and procedures for quality assurance, monitoring and periodic review of programs and awards, assessment of students, quality assurance of teaching staff, learning resources and student support, information system, public information

- European standards and guidelines for the external quality assurance of higher education: the using of internal assurance procedures, developing external quality assurance processes, criteria for decisions, processes fit for purpose, reporting, follow-up procedures, periodic reviews, and system-wide analysis

- European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies: the using of external quality assurance procedures for higher education, official status, activities, resources, mission statement, independence, external quality assurance criteria and processes used by agencies, and accountability procedure (EAQAHE, 2005).

The purposes of the standards and guidelines are to improve the quality of education for students in higher education institutions in Europe as well as to assist the higher education institutions in successful management, enhancement of educational quality and achieve institutional autonomy. The purposes of the standards are also, to establish a background for quality assurance agencies and to make external quality assurance understandable for everybody involved (EAQAHE, 2005).

Finally, Briller and Iskakova (2004) analyze the challenges of education in Central Asia. They criticize the Central Asian higher education institutions. Briller and Iskakova describe these parts of assessment of higher education institutions: licensing, attestation and
accreditation. The licensing in higher education is concerned with the adequacy of
documentation, buildings, facilities, and the quantity of faculty and staff. The attestation
stay with the present tense - examines the curricula, programs, scheduling of classes and
whether the institutional documents meet the national norms and standards. The
accreditation focuses on the quality of instructors and degree programs, and the quality and
quantity of research and publications. The researchers concluded that in the Republic of
Kazakhstan all three assessments were superficial and did not satisfy students, their parents,
the higher education institution itself or the Ministry of Education. The main reasons for
this are the decentralization of management of higher education and the higher education
institutions offering of a number of new prestigious, but non-accredited programs such as
law, computer science, economics and foreign languages. Briller and Iskakova state that, at
the time of their research, the number of private institutions in Kazakhstan was twice that
of public ones. Each private university opened new degree programs which were supposed
to be accredited and licensed. Consequently, accreditation became an issue for the
Kazakhstan Ministry of Education and Science.

A great number of researchers study quality assessment and define quality based
on their area of study. Since quality in higher education is not tangible and is ambiguous,
higher education institutions and accreditation agencies face challenges in assessing the
quality of education. In the time of educational reforms, Kazakhstan can learn from the
world experience of quality assessment. First, establishing the assessment of student
learning outcomes is essential for higher education institutions to improve quality in
service, research, teaching and learning. This type of assessment includes defining the
goals of students, evaluating the process and achievement of goals, and using the results for further university quality development. Second, without developing internal quality, the higher education institutions will not succeed in achieving external quality and world recognition. In this stage of educational reforms, higher education institutions in Kazakhstan should focus more on internal quality assessment rather than external, because without internal quality higher education cannot achieve external quality. Taking into consideration the Soviet Union mentality possessed by the majority of faculty and administrators, the kaizen assessment can be effective for developing quality of service, research, teaching and learning in higher education institutions of Kazakhstan. Radical changes tend to meet resistance due to the generational, cultural and mentality differences between the older and younger populations. The universities in Kazakhstan can have the structure of world class universities, but changes in structure do not necessarily mean improvement of quality. Furthermore, applying the general model of higher education quality assessment offered by Van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) to the higher education institutions in Kazakhstan can be beneficial. Finally, the researcher, taking into consideration the goal of Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan as well as higher education institutions in terms of joining the Bologna Process, states that the European standards and guidelines on quality assurance can be used to establish institutional assessment, national assessment, and international assessment. However, to ensure the practicality of quality assessment based on European standards and guidelines, the higher education institutions of Kazakhstan as well as most accrediting agencies should actively collaborate with the specialists in the field.
Methodology

Descriptive qualitative method is used for the research. The research describes current educational reforms in the Republic of Kazakhstan, the difficulties in accessing the information and networking, the validity of the information available or presented for public, as well as the perception of quality in higher education. Since the topic is being researched for the first time, the researcher faced difficulties in accessing valid information: the websites of the institutions are not multifunctional, have limited access, and most often the contact information of individuals is not provided to the public. Moreover, the official website of the National Accreditation Center did not work for a three month period, April-June 2009. Being in a geographically different location, the researcher had to wait until she was able to visit the NAC office in Astana, Kazakhstan in June 2009. To contact the administrators of the NAC, the researcher had an oral referral from an administrator at the department of Quality and Assessment of Higher Education of Kazakhstan Department at the Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Kazakhstan. Only by being recognized as a participant at the International Rankings Expert Group (IREG-4) conference and introducing herself as a “Bolashak Scholar” (a winner of Presidential International Scholarship “Bolashak” provided by the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan) was the researcher able to access the information. Next, the researcher faced obstacles in contacting the upper level administrators without referrals, as well as contacting professionals in the department of Quality and Assessment of Higher Education in the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

For data collection and networking, the researcher attended the IREG-4 conference
2009, Astana, Kazakhstan and sent 500 e-mails requesting participation in the project. To attract the students, the researcher used social networking such as Facebook Events, etc. Mainly, two groups of people were interviewed: the professionals in the field and the students who have experience at Kazakhstani higher education institutions as well as at the universities abroad. The difficulties in accessing the information are as follows: some professionals in higher education did not show interest in participating in the study unless the researcher had a referral or mutual interest in assistance. By contrast, several students reached out to the researcher and asked to participate in the project. The students, during the interview, showed great enthusiasm and openly criticized the higher education system as well as the universities in Kazakhstan. The total number of participants is 31; this number is composed of eleven professionals in the field and twenty students. The interviews were made by phone, by e-mail, by web conference and face-to-face. The researcher used semi-structured interviews for collecting data and information for the study. Ten percent of the participants preferred not to speak openly; 3 % of the participants changed their mind after agreeing to have their names be public. One of the biggest challenges the researcher experienced was difficulties in having the consent forms signed. Consent forms were sent by e-mail in advance of the interviews to eleven of the participants, all education professionals, who promised to sign and return them. However, seven of the participants did not return the consent forms, despite repeated requests by e-mail and telephone. Therefore, the researcher is not able to present about 60% of the information acquired through the interviews of both the institutional and upper level administrators. The ignoring of the consent forms by participants the
research researcher explains as a cultural phenomenon; the use of consent forms and IRB permission is not common in the higher education system of Kazakhstan.

The significance of the research is that it is being presented for the first time; it can be helpful for the development of higher education institutions in the Republic of Kazakhstan, especially when the Kazakh government and higher education institutions are interested in meeting the world standards of higher education. The languages the research was conducted in are English, Russian, Kazakh and Uzbek. In addition, the research can serve as basic information for researchers interested in similar topics. Finally, the academicians and professionals in the field can benefit from it in terms of understanding their own perspectives based on cultural, educational and professional experience, the definitions of quality education and the changes in meeting the world standards of higher education.
Results

The fundamental changes in educational reforms in the Republic of Kazakhstan started in 2004 with the initiatives of the President of Independent Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbaev. With the decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Ministry of Education and Science established the “State-Run Education Development Program 2005-2010” (Kazakhstan Government, 2009). The goals of the program are achieving the modernization of the national educational system, increasing the integration of quality into human resources and meeting the needs of individuals as well as society. The program focuses on reforms in both elementary and secondary school education and at higher education levels. It consists of two stages. On the higher education level each stage is oriented as follows:

- **First stage 2005-2007**: reforms in the structure of higher education, i.e., implementing Bachelor’s, Master’s (only full time), and PhD degrees in Kazakhstan higher education institutions. Also, developing a national system of quality assessment.

- **Second stage 2008-2010**: increasing the resources in higher education, preparing high-quality specialists, achieving high quality teaching and learning in higher education institutions of Kazakhstan, implementing the system of quality management in higher education institutions, institutional evaluation and accreditation of educational programs based on the standards of international accreditation agencies as well as implementing basic principles of the Bologna Declaration.
The first stage of the plan resulted in the official acceptance of a multi-level degree structure of higher education, i.e., Bachelor’s, Master’s, and PhD levels and the confirmation of the structure in the Law of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2007 (Tuimebaev, 2009).

**Accreditation Agencies**

As a part of the Education Development Program 2005-2010, in 2005 the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan established the first accreditation agency: the National Accreditation Center (NAC) (NAC, 2009). The functions of the NAC include the accreditation of higher education institutions, registration of diplomas received at the universities abroad and ranking of higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. After the founding of the NAC, the assessment of quality in higher education became a major concern. Kalanova and Bishimbaev (2006) note that the results of the questionnaire administered to the faculty and administrators in higher education shows that they did not have views on problems of quality. As Kalanova and Bishimbaev state that this initial questionnaire on the issue of quality assurance in higher education of the Republic of Kazakhstan has raised the further discussion. In 2008 Kalanova established the Independent Quality Assurance Agency (IQAA website). The standards of the quality assessment of both the NAC and the IQAA are based on the same criteria. Since Kalanova is the co-author of national standards of quality assurance used by the NAC, the researcher assumes that Kalanova uses the same standards of quality assessment in IQAA (IQAA, 2009).
Committee on Control of Education and Science

In 2004, with the decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Ministry of Education and Science established the Committee on Control of Education and Science (Committee on Control of Education and Science, 2009). The Committee’s responsibilities include the attestation of education, implementation of government educational projects, control of education, licensing the educational institutions, intermediate government control through testing the students’ academic learning as well as attestations of faculty and researchers. The intermediate government control (IGC) of students is a required part of undergraduate education at the higher education level: four years bachelor’s degree and five-year specialist degree students are obliged to take the standardized test provided by the Committee on Control of Education and Science at the end of the second year. The students of medical schools are obliged to take the test at the end of the third year of their education. Based on the test results, the Committee controls quality assurance in higher education institutions (Committee on Control of Education and Science, 2009). The rector of the Eurasian Institute of Marketing, Aitkali Nurseit, considers the IGC of students unnecessary and ineffective in the process of quality assurance (Nurseit, 2009). Six of the 20 students who participated in the research interviews criticized the IGC. They describe their experience at public institutions as follows: often, the majority of students start cramming for the test a few days before. It takes time and makes students overly worried. Usually students are tested on 6 subject areas and the student does not receive any credit for taking the test. Sometimes students are threatened with expulsion from the higher education institution in the case of failure.
Meirgul Alpyshbaeva (personal communication, October 3, 2009), who used to study in Karaganda State University, believes that the IGC test did not evaluate the knowledge she gained during her 2 years of study at the university. It was a set of questions to evaluate the standards of the University’s quality, but not the knowledge of the students. As Aitkali Nurseit states, neither higher education institutions nor students in Kazakhstan benefit from IGC organized by the Committee on Control of Education and Science (Nurseit, 2009).

Next, the Committee on Control of Education and Science deals with the licensing of higher education institutions, i.e., it examines the adequacy of institutional documentation, number of staff, libraries, buildings, laboratories and sports facilities in order to approve whether they meet the norm and national standards required by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Finally, the Committee on Control of Education and Science deals with the attestation of faculty and researchers. The attestation or “attestatsia,” a common term used in Kazakhstan, is the evaluation of the quality of faculty and researchers in higher education. Regularly, the faculty goes through attestation processes to maintain their status in the higher education institution. The attestation process evaluates the curricula, scheduling and programs (Committee on Control of Education and Science, 2009).

Sometimes the higher education institution defines the methods of the faculty attestation. For example, the Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and Foreign Languages decided to evaluate the faculty in the professional testing section. The Translation Department has mainly two types of faculty: the faculty teaching English and
the faculty teaching translation. In May 2006 and 2007 the faculty members of the
Department were evaluated by the Test on Translation. The purposes of the test were the
attestation of the faculty and the test results determines the salary of the faculty for the next
coming academic year. Consequently, test scores of the faculty teaching translation were
higher than the test scores of faculty teaching English. The attestation based on this type of
testing and determination of salary based on test scores aroused dissatisfiction among
faculty. In 2008 the University decided to evaluate the quality of English teaching faculty
by IELT, i.e., the testing system required for international student admission in higher
education institutions of English-speaking countries. During the interview with this
researcher, a female faculty member teaching English at the Translation Department
expressed her dissatisfaction by stating that this testing process is ineffective in the
evaluation of faculty quality. She noted that knowledge of English is not the only criterion
for defining the quality of faculty; the quality of the faculty should be evaluated by the
ability to teach and the methodology the faculty uses in the process of education. She
mentioned the influence of the budget cuts on the faculty and staff. The Department
decreased the number of faculty and staff, while increasing the teaching hours of those in
full-time positions. In her opinion, the quality of faculty should be measured by class
demonstration, publications, research, the changes in academic results of the students and
other professional achievements.

IREG-4: Conference of the International Rankings Expert Group

As a part of higher educational reforms, the Government of Kazakhstan and
Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan hosted the conference
IREG-4, the 4th Conference of the International Rankings Expert Group, in the capital of the Republic of Kazakhstan Astana in June 14-16, 2009. At the conference the participants covered the three main topical lines such as international/regional rankings, national rankings, and approaches and measurements for developing comparable transnational data, taking into consideration the limitations of a “culture of numbers” in evaluating quality of research and other activities accomplished or performed by higher education institutions (IREG, 2009). According to the speech of Zhanseit Tuimebayev, the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the aim of the conference was not only to develop comparable methods of ranking, but also to establish the dialogue between the Rectors of the Higher Education Institutions of Kazakhstan and foreign agencies on rating and assessment, and also to provide an opportunity to discuss the incorporation of Kazakhstani universities into the world rating system (the Program brochure, IREG, 2009). As a participant, the researcher observed a three day conference organized by the IREG (International Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence), the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and the European Center of Higher Education UNESCO-CEPES (IREG, 2009, and Program Brochure IREG-4, 2009). However, according to the researcher’s observation, both the IKQAA (Independent Kazakhstan Quality Assurance Agency in Education, also known as the IQAA, the Independent Quality Assurance Agency) and the NAC (National Accreditation Centre of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan) participated as the organizers of the conference, but were not credited in the official papers. A few participants shared information about changes in the program, but
preferred not to be publicly quoted in the thesis.

On June 13, 2009 the pre-conference special workshop was organized to introduce academic ranking to the Rectors of Universities of the Republic of Kazakhstan. On June 14, 2009 only international participants attended the welcome reception; the local people who attended the reception were organizers from the IQAA and the NAC. Although the list of participants consists of 155 people, on June 15th less than 100 people showed up. According to the researcher’s observations, the majority of local participants did not attend the conference. Also, the official website of NAC states that about 60 Rectors of Kazakh Universities and 60 foreign participants as well as the guests and organizers attended the conference IREG-4. The researcher noticed the lack of communication between local and foreign participants both during the breaks between the sessions of the conference as well as during lunch hours and dinner periods that were organized by the Kazakhstan government. The participants were isolated in their national groups, and as a result, communication between the two groups was limited. This can be explained by either lack of interest on the part of the domestic participants in establishing networking with foreign agencies or due to the language barrier between English speaking and non-English speaking participants. In spite of interpreters provided by the IQAA and the NAC, not many administrators from Higher Education Institutions of Kazakhstan showed their interest in building networking with members of foreign agencies at the Conference. As the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Zhanseit Tuimebayev, mentioned in his speech, IREG-4 creates an opportunity for foreign participants to learn about Kazakhstan Higher Education
Institutions and their work process and education system. However, due to the limited or lack of communication between foreign guests and local participants, the researcher doubts that the foreign participants of the IREG-4 learned much about Kazakhstan Higher Education. In addition, the local participants seemed to be passive in the discussion sections of the conference except for the Rector of the Eurasia Institute of Marketing.

At the conference Zhanseit Tuiebayev, the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, noted that the higher education institutions in Kazakhstan aim for international accreditation. Besides national and institutional accreditations, two universities of Kazakhstan were accredited on an international level. In 2007, the Kazakh Leading Academy of Architecture and Construction received international accreditation on the specialization “architecture” by UNESCO-MCA. In 2008, the South-Kazakhstan State University named after Auezov, received accreditation by the International accreditation agency “ASIIN” in seven educational programs (Tuimebayev, 2009). This information is also published in the article by Shakhanova and Balgabaeva (2009).

However, in the article published on August 6, 2009, Serik Irsaliyev, the director of the Strategic Development Department of the Ministry of Education and Science stated that none of the higher education institutions of Kazakhstan received international accreditation (Kazakhstan Today, 2009). Serik Irsaliyev, the official representative of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, said "competitiveness of the nation is defined not simply by a significant quantity of students, but by a considerable quantity of students receiving high quality education” (para.4). As he noted, although the graduates with Bachelor’s degrees from higher education institutions of
Kazakhstan are successfully applying to the Master’s and PhD programs of world class universities, the higher education institutions themselves did not receive international accreditation (Kazakhstan Today, 2009). The researcher found the information on international accreditation of higher education institutions of Kazakhstan to be contradictory. Both pieces of information come from the officials of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

**Variations in Perception of Quality**

Although the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the accreditation agencies the NAC and the IQAA as well as higher education institutions made efforts to achieve quality assurance, the concept of quality still remains in dispute. The perception of quality varies from institution to institution, organization to organization, and individual to individual. The research describes three types of perception of quality in higher education. In higher education of Kazakhstan, the perception of quality varies at upper administrative level, institutional level, and student level.

**Perception of Quality at Upper Administrative Level**

At upper administrative level quality is viewed by having structural reforms of higher education, establishing international partnerships, joining the Bologna Process, implementing the Strategic Planning, and concentrating on accreditation and quantity of higher education institutions in the country. According to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the higher education institutions will develop quality by gaining international recognition, implementing world-class university
standards and preparing internationally competent specialists (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2009). Therefore, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan defines quality education as accepting Westernized curricula, ensuring student mobility, institutions’ receiving international accreditation and establishing international partnerships in higher education with the focus of creating dual degree programs (Tuimebaev, 2009). Zhanseit Tuimebaev, the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, states that developing international partnerships between the national and foreign higher educational institutions creates the conditions for realization of joint educational programs. He notes that it is important to establish dual diploma education programs in Kazakhstan higher education institutions and maintains that “due to the program realization in cooperation with the foreign universities we seek to make Kazakhstan degrees recognizable in the world and to get Kazakhstan universities involved into international ratings and joint projects” (Tuimebaev, 2009). Moreover, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan decreased the number of private schools, closing those that do not meet national standards of higher education and the degree programs. Since higher education in the Soviet Union excluded private institutions and universities, the majority of private schools were established in Kazakhstan in the last 15 years. According to the information stated in the “State-Run Education Development Program 2005-2010” in 2004, 180 (46 public and 134 private) higher education institutions plus 86 branches functioned in Kazakhstan (Kazakhstan Government, 2009). In 2005 the number of higher education institutions dropped to 176 and the branches dropped to 83 (European Commission on
Education and Training, 2009). However, in 2009 in the territory of Kazakhstan, 141 higher education institutions are functional. Sixty three of these are in the private educational sector (the Republic of Kazakhstan Presidential page, 2009). Based on the statistics, from 2004 to 2009, 39 higher education institutions and 23 branches of higher education institutions were closed by the initiatives of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The Committee organized by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan to inspect higher education institutions and analyze their function found that the institutions did not meet national educational standards (Matkhalikova, 2007). The Institution of Management founded in 1997 was closed in July-August of 2009. A male student from the Institute of Management experienced “a last minute decision” in transferring to another school since the academic year in higher education institutions of Kazakhstan starts in September. He explains that the university was closed based on the quality assurance program by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. So, one of the ways of achieving quality in higher education is by cutting down the number of private institutions in Kazakhstan (personal communication, September 4, 2009). However, the information that discloses the reason for closure of the institutions in Kazakhstan is not publicly available. This underscores the problem of lack of transparency regarding quality assessment in Kazakhstan.

Perception of Quality at Institutional Level

Higher education institutions in Kazakhstan define quality as the existence of academic resources such as libraries, technology, and internet access, students’ language
skills as well as technology skills, the quantity of faculty with Master’s and PhD degrees, institutional recognition, successful attestation and accreditation of the institution, the implementation of the credit hour system in higher education, and students’ mobility, through joining the Bologna Process. With the purpose of making world class education available for students inside of the country, a new university was built in Astana. The first enrollment is planned for the fall of 2010. The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan is collaborating with the University College London in establishing the criteria for admissions, curricula, management, etc (University College London, 2009). A number of professionals in higher education are working on the model of Astana University in Kazakhstan. One of them, Bektursyn Kaldaev, the President of the JSC “Center for International Programs” (the Kazakhstan Presidential Scholarship “Bolashak”), considers that the quality of higher education depends on highly qualified faculty and administration (personal communication, June 19, 2009). Moreover, Kaldaev notes that the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan plays a significant role in developing criteria for quality higher education. He believes that by joining the Bologna Process, Kazakhstani higher education will benefit in terms of implementing quality assurance standards of European education, and educating internationally competent professionals in order to give them the opportunity to work anywhere in the world. Finally, with the purpose of increasing the number of researchers, and professionals with Master’s and PhD degrees, the Presidential Scholarship program “Bolashak” added the following criteria in the selection process. In 2007, it began offering the scholarship award for researchers. The Scholarship gives special provision
for favoring faculty and teachers who have at least 3 years of experience, increased the number of graduate degree programs available in foreign higher education institutions, and provided a quota for applicants from villages (CIP, 2009). With the purpose of increasing the quality of education provided by the Presidential Scholarship “Bolashak”, the CIP decreased the number of universities that scholarship recipients may attend from 480 to 200 (Kaldaev, personal communication, June 19, 2009).

Zeine Orazbekova, the Vice-Rector of the University of Foreign Languages and Careers (a private higher education institution in Almaty, Kazakhstan), also the external expert on accreditation of the NAC of the Republic of Kazakhstan and National Accreditation Agency in Education of Russian Federation, defines the quality of higher education as follows:

- Students’ ability to manage with technology, and computer programs
- The knowledge foreign languages such as English, French, etc
- Academic mobility of students stated in Bologna Process
- Students graduating with the Bachelor’s degree should meet all the required professional skill skills of their major
- Student-oriented higher education (Orazbekova, personal communication, September, 2009).

To improve the quality of education, the University of Foreign Languages and Careers is working with international partners, i.e., higher education institutions in Turkey and China (students spend a semester in these countries studying or doing an internship) (personal communication, September, 2009). According to Zeine Orazbekova, the quality
of higher education in Kazakhstan is increased by building the foundation of education from elementary school throughout high school education. Also quality can be increased by moving the higher education institutions toward student-oriented education, and by implementing the credit system and giving academic freedom for the students in terms of choosing major, school, classes, etc. The advantages of a Kazakh education are that the majority of students study in four languages such as Kazakh, Russian, English, and Turkish or others. The competence in languages helps the students work internationally. The results of an interview with Zeine Orazbekova show that the accreditation and attestation play a significant role in evaluating the quality of higher education (personal communication, September, 2009).

A Department Chair in the Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and Foreign Languages says that the University should be a learning environment for faculty and students (personal communication, October, 2009). The University’s responsibility is to provide the students with academic resources: high-quality faculty, private and additional textbooks, labs (both major specific and computer labs), libraries and free Internet access on campus. Also, social assistance such as establishing the offices that deal with the students’ internships and employment, residence halls and life, financial aid, etc. should be provided. The tremendous workloads of faculty and low salaries affect the quality of higher education. Some faculty members have one full-time job in a department and a part-time at another educational institution. The majority of full-time students have to work in order to cover their tuition. These factors reflect on the quality of both the learning and teaching process.
Zhanseit Tuimebaev, the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan defines the accreditation of educational institutions as a tool for quality assurance (Tuimebaev, 2009). According to the review of higher education in the Republic of Kazakhstan, accreditation is considered to be an important factor that seriously impacts the quality of higher education and affects international recognition of Kazakhstani higher education institutions (European Commission on Education and Training, 2009). Whereas the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the accreditation agencies the NAC and the IQAA, the Committee on Control of Education and Science, and higher education institutions in Kazakhstan view accreditation and attestation as essential in developing the quality of education, the students’ perspectives on the quality of higher education in Kazakhstan showed less or no emphases on accreditation, attestation as well as ranking of Kazakhstani higher education institutions.

**Perception of Quality at the Student Level**

At the student level, quality is defined by employability, practicality of the knowledge, academic freedom, updated curricula, qualified faculty, learning resources and the learning environment, and the absence of corruption in the academy. An engineering major male student from Kazakhstan currently studying at a large state university in the USA defines the quality of higher education as the applicability of knowledge, updated learning resources and the employability of the students after graduation. In his opinion, the improvements of higher education in Kazakhstan should be systematic, i.e., apply to all higher education institutions (personal communication, September 14, 2009). He suggests that higher education institutions should redefine their
goals and missions and that implementing a new system should not destroy the core of the existing system in certain majors such as Math and Physics. Changes should be made in academic culture in the following areas: the attitudes of students such as reluctance to learn and lack of motivation. Also there should be changes concerning the practicality of knowledge, such as internships, the academic resources, academic freedom of students, and increasing the salary of the faculty which is an essential part in developing quality. The student shared his experience at the Kazakh National University named after Al-Farabi, a public higher education institution in Kazakhstan. In 2006 the credit system was applied. The faculty and administrators did not welcome the new system and responded to this with criticism and hesitation. The faculty started using new terminology and a new grading system: A, B, C, and D instead of the 5 to 1 rating scale. However, the students studied in fixed groups, had a fixed schedule, and even electives were chosen by the department for the group. This explains that the major obstacle in improving the quality of education and higher education institutions of Kazakhstan is the mentality of faculty and students.

The majority of the faculty does not have motivation to teach because of low salaries. When the faculty’s salary is about 60,000 TENGE (Kazakh currency, equals approximately USD 400 according to the rate on October 10, 2009), usually they have two jobs to support their family. Therefore making money, not teaching, becomes their priority. Fifteen of 20 students who participated in the research interviews highlighted the faculty salary as an important factor in increasing the quality: it increases the motivation of faculty and decreases corruption in higher education. Students lack the motivation to learn, want to get grades easily, and consequently often resort to plagiarism. Eleven of 20 students
commented on the absence of a plagiarism policy in higher education institutions and its importance in the process of developing and maintaining the quality of higher education.

In general, an engineering major male student currently studying at a large state university in the US believes that the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan is responsible for developing the quality of higher education in Kazakhstan because it has the power to influence higher education institutions and control them. In fact, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan has much control over the academy (personal communication, September 14, 2009). Meduev (2004) states that the proportion of how disciplines are chosen in higher education is as follows: 3% of student's classes are chosen by them, 27% are determined by the higher education institution and 70% are determined by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. As for the question of who is responsible for the quality of higher education in the universities of Kazakhstan, 6 of 20 students responded that the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan is responsible, 5 of 20 students viewed faculty and administrators as responsible, and 9 of 20 students considered everyone equally responsible: students, faculty, administrators of the university, policy makers in higher education and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Zhanibek Bekmurat, an electrical engineering major undergraduate student at Purdue University, views the quality of higher education through the establishment of a learning and social environment for students (personal communication, September 29, 2009). By learning environment, he refers to the presence of high-quality faculty, labs,
libraries, organized group studies or additional classes offered by the University, as well as practica and internships. The social environment is judged by the establishment of faculty-student relationships, alumni networking, the campus environment, and equal access for both local and regional students living in residence halls (the majority of Kazakhstani universities have a limited number of residence halls and only regional students are allowed to live there; the student states that universities in Kazakhstan do not have campuses like those in the United States. Therefore, the majority of students of Kazakhstan spend at least two hours a day commuting). Zhanibek Bekmurat shares his experiences at the Almaty Institute of Power and Telecommunications: in 2007, the institution used the credit system. The structure of credit hours was implemented, but in actuality, students still studied in fixed groups, and were not allowed to choose classes. Kazakhstani students had to pay money for additional tutorials. He suggests that changes in Kazakhstani higher education require long term commitment and finance (personal communication, September 29, 2009). Corruption and insufficiency of learning materials are two major obstacles hindering the development of higher education quality in Kazakhstan.

A female student who studied both at the Eurasian National University named after L.N. Gumilev in Kazakhstan and a large state university in the USA, states that attestation and accreditation are a “meaningless waste of money” since neither students nor faculty benefit from this evaluation process (personal communication, September, 29, 2009). None of the 20 students questioned whether or not the higher education institution was accredited when they applied; they did not even use the ranking or rating of higher education
institutions in Kazakhstan when they applied to the university. When they chose a university in Kazakhstan, they discussed the matter with their parents, high school teachers, or people who graduated from those universities. However, 12 of those students used program or institutional rankings of higher education institutions in a country in which they studied abroad.

Arman Batayev, a student at Purdue University who previously studied at the Kazakh-British Technical University, measures the quality of higher education by means of student preparation for a professional career and the adaptability of individuals to changes in the working areas as well as in society (personal communication, September 27, 2009). The essential criteria for developing the quality of higher education in Kazakhstan are the implementation of policy in higher education institutions, and switching to the credit system. By establishing policies regarding the academic dishonesty of students and faculty as well as administrators, the higher education institutions will achieve justice and fairness, professionalism, and quality of management. Arman Batayev says that “students should be the main push-to-policy individuals because it is in their best interest”. Next, he is 1 of 4 use words rather than figures for one-word numbers students who commented on the Bologna Process. He views joining the Bologna Process as beneficial for establishing the graduate programs in Kazakhstani higher education institutions. Finally, he suggests that the Kazakhstani higher education institutions should collaborate with students who have academic experience both at a university in Kazakhstan and abroad (personal communication, September 27, 2009).

A female undergraduate student at the KIMEP (Kazakhstan Institute of
Management, Economics and Strategic Research) with study abroad experience at a higher education institution in Europe, defines quality education as academic resources, the absence of corruption, a friendly learning environment, and open minded faculty who are willing to assist the students in the learning process (personal communication, September 29, 2009). Also, creating new policies, applying them to higher education institutions and financing education are the important factors in the process of higher educational reforms. A male student who studied in the Kazakh National University named after Al-Farabi and at a large public university in the USA notes that good faculty and student relationships, establishing online education, libraries with online access, and changing the Soviet Union mentality of faculty and administrators can positively affect the quality of higher education (personal communication, September 20, 2009).

Saniya Kartayeva, a graduate student at the University of Western Ontario, Canada, highlights the “Soviet Minded Mentality” of some faculty and administrators as causing resistance to the reforms in higher education in Kazakhstan (personal communication, September 21, 2009). In her opinion, the second factor is the lack of motivation and desire of youth working in the higher education institutions due to the low salary of faculty. She states that Kazakhstan higher education institutions need to establish academic democracy, a friendly environment, and well-organized student support services. Besides, they need to study the new education system that will be implemented (personal communication, September 23, 2009).

Nazerke Sadybekova, who studied both at Kazakh-British Technical University and a public university in the Netherlands, suggests that highly qualified faculty, learning
resources, up-to-date curriculum, internships and financing are the key factors in improving the quality of higher education in Kazakhstan (personal communication, September 19, 2009). Furthermore, she states that students should take initiative and get actively involved in the process of developing the quality of education in Kazakhstan. Finally, the higher education institutions in Kazakhstan should implement the assessment of student learning outcomes.

Sholpan Tursunbayeva, a graduate student at Cesar Ritz University in Switzerland, who previously studied in Kazakh National University named after Al-Farabi, describes higher education in Kazakhstan as being theoretical rather than practical (personal communication, September 17, 2009). During the education reforms, the professionals in higher education institutions should focus on the curricula, analyze them and make appropriate changes. The curricula selection should be based on developing students’ professionalism, as well as the ability to apply theory into practice, psychological improvements and social skills. Next, the research engagement of both faculty and students is an important part of what education should be. Finally, Sholpan Tursunbayeva says that the “Teacher knows everything, so what s/he tells cannot be commented on” mentality should be removed from the mindset of faculty, administrators as well as students in the academy (personal communication, September 17, 2009).

Saken Akhmetov, MSc in Jurisprudence, defines the quality higher education by the successful results of alumni, research and professional staff (personal communication, September 18, 2009). He considers that essential criteria for developing quality are destroying the corruption rate, increasing the salaries and prestige of teaching in higher
education institutions, and providing attestation, evaluation and monitoring of staff competency. Moreover, higher education institutions are slowly reacting to the implementations of new innovations and new educational methods. In addition to this, the authority of the management systems in higher education institutions does not allow students to participate in the process of developing the quality of higher education. There is no academic freedom for students at the universities and the universities do not view students as collaborators in educational reforms. Lastly, he notes that the Bologna Process might influence the international recognition of Kazakhstani degrees, but may not have influence on developing the internal quality of higher education institution institutions (personal communication, September 18, 2009).

A female student graduated with a Translation Specialist Degree from a Large public university in Kazakhstan, currently a second-degree in Business major, says that she realized that translation was not the area of her interest after five years of study and one year of full-time employment (personal communication, September 13, 2009). Due to the lack of internships and practical knowledge in higher education institutions, students spend years and a lot of money just to realize that they do not like the work of their first degree and thus pursue a second degree. According to the review of higher education in the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2009, the statistics show that only 30-40% of the students who graduate from higher education institutions find jobs based on their specialization (European Commission on Education and Training, 2009).
Discussion

According to the results of this research, the perception of quality varies in different levels of higher education. At the Ministry of Education and Science level, the quality of higher education is more or less related to structural reforms of higher education, international partnerships, joining the Bologna Process, implementation of strategic planning, control of higher education, accreditation and the number of higher education institutions. Within five years 39 higher education institutions and 23 branches of universities have been closed due to their failure to meet government standards and norms in education. However, the detailed information such as criteria, reasons and policies for closing universities are not available to the public. The question arises: should we consider quantity versus quality, or does quantity support quality in the higher education of Kazakhstan? The Ministry of Education and Science can increase the rate of quality by reducing the number of higher education institutions. For example, the Z number of Kazakhstani higher education institutions out of 180 receives the accreditation and meets the Government standards. The quality percentage is defined by: \( \frac{Z \times 100}{180} \). If the Z number of Kazakhstani higher education institutions out of 141 receives the accreditation and meets the Government standards, the percentage of quality is as follows: \( \frac{Z \times 100}{141} \). In both cases Z is smaller than 141; therefore, the percentage rate \( \frac{Z100}{141} \) is higher than \( \frac{Z100}{180} \). So, by reducing the number of higher education institutions, Kazakhstan can achieve a higher rate of quality, but this quality does not necessarily indicate the internal quality of higher education institutions.

At a higher education institution level, quality is defined by the existence of
academic resources such as libraries, technology, internet access, students’ language skills as well as technology skills, the quantity of faculty with Master’s and PhD degrees, institutional recognition, successful attestation and accreditation, the new concept of a credit system and student mobility through joining the Bologna Process. Finally, another new term “student oriented education” is coming into the higher education vault in Kazakhstan. However, defining the students’ academic and professional goals, assisting them to achieve their goals, and assessing the student learning outcomes do not seem to be a priority for the higher education institutions in Kazakhstan.

At a student level, the quality of higher education is determined by employability, the practicality of the knowledge, economic freedom, updated curricula, qualified faculty, and the absence of corruption in the academy. Besides, students show interest in participating in the process of higher education reforms in Kazakhstan. Unfortunately, due to the existing academic culture in Kazakhstani higher education institutions, the majority of administrators and faculty do not view student opinions as being valuable. Ironically, the “Students’ Constitution” which consists of two parts: “Professor is always right; if s/he is not right, address the part one” is still valid in the majority of higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. Although the students criticized the faculty for having “Soviet Minded Mentality”, they supported the faculty by suggesting that the higher education institutions increase faculty salary, salaries provide professional training, and offer academic and social support. Indeed, the faculty is the main academic resource in Kazakhstani higher education institutions. If the development of quality higher education helps to increase the economic output of Kazakhstan, then the
implementation of both the institutional and government support such as an increase in
salary, financial aids, professional training, research opportunities, etc. will play an
essential role.

Finally, when the employment rate of graduates nationwide shows that only 30-
40%, are working in the field for which they were trained, and students’ goals in pursuing
higher education highlights employability and the applicability of professional skills in
higher education institutions in Kazakhstan, accreditation agencies, the departments of
the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan that deal with
higher education, quality of education, quality assurance and assessment, and educational
control should consider the issue, i.e., the needs and interests of the current students.
Kazakhstani higher education institutions as well as higher education professionals
should not sacrifice the education of today's students for the sake of creating a better
education in five years.
Conclusions

The concept of quality education is ambiguous and vague, however, it can be specified when it is applied in context. During the reform of higher education, the professional and higher education institutions in Kazakhstan face many obstacles in the way of educational developments.

First, limited public access to the information on higher education of Kazakhstan is a major concern of the researcher. The information can be obtained through networking, referrals, and visiting the organizations and institutions. Moreover, the validity of the information on higher education of Kazakhstan is suspect. The publicly accessible information is contradictory; the professional contacts such as email and mailing address of the higher education professionals are not provided online to the public.

Second, the generational difference in attitudes of the participants is immense. The younger generation showed enthusiasm and shared their interests in educational developments in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, the students openly spoke out and criticized the current higher education system, the faculty and administrators as well as the government organizations. The students’ interests favor the student academic learning outcomes while the majority of administrators are interested in institutional achievements. 60 % of the administrators did not provide consent forms. This prevents the researcher from presenting the information. All in all, students take initiative to participate in the educational reforms; however, their opinions and interests are under evaluated.
Next, the majority of Kazakhstani higher education institutions are still viewed as a teaching place rather than a learning environment that supports the interests of the students. Two thirds of higher education graduates are unemployable in their specialized areas in Kazakhstan, yet professionals in higher education show concerns and interest in the Bologna Process, student mobility, quality assessment based on European standards, dual diploma programs, international accreditation and world recognition. The information that explains reasons for the unemployment rate is not publicly available. However, it can be assumed that graduates are not adequately prepared for employment.

Finally, the major obstacles hindering the changes in higher education are the absence of unique interpretation of quality education and quality assessment applicable to the higher education institutions of Kazakhstan, the absence or ignorance of a student voice in the process of reforms, limited institutional autonomy, limited academic and research resources, lack of motivation of both faculty and students, the low salary rate of faculty, corruption, the proportion of theoretical to practical knowledge in higher education institutions, the absence of assessment based on student learning outcomes, and limited academic freedom.

For further studies, the researcher recommends the investigation of the perception of the quality of higher education from a faculty perspective, as well as from traditional students' perspectives and from the employers’ perspectives. Also to be considered are the policies and criteria for closing higher education institutions in Kazakhstan, the effectiveness and influence of the NAC and the IQAA on the development of university quality, how the development of higher education can cause an increase in the economic
development or economic growth of Kazakhstan, and the reasons for the low rate of graduate employment and ways of increasing it.
APPENDIX

Sources used to describe the perception of quality at upper administrative level, institutional level & student level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Upper administrative level</th>
<th>Institutional level</th>
<th>Student level</th>
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<tr>
<td>Public speech</td>
<td>Public speech</td>
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<td>- Nurseit, (2009);</td>
<td>- Nurseit, (2009);</td>
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<td>- Tuimebaev, (2009)</td>
<td>- Tuimebaev, (2009);</td>
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<td>Personal communication</td>
<td>Personal communication</td>
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<td>- Interview with a</td>
<td>- Kaldaev, the president of</td>
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<td>student/ the Institute of</td>
<td>the Center for</td>
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<td>Management, Kazakhstan;</td>
<td>International Programs,</td>
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<td>Due to the absence of</td>
<td>Kazakhstan;</td>
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<td>consent forms, the</td>
<td>- Orazbekova, the vice-</td>
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<td>researcher was not able</td>
<td>rector of the University of</td>
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<td>to present interview</td>
<td>Foreign Languages and</td>
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<td>results in this study</td>
<td>Careers, Kazakhstan;</td>
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<td>(four people were</td>
<td>- A department chair,</td>
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<td>interviewed);</td>
<td>Kazakh Ablai Khan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- University of</td>
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<td>International Relations &amp; World</td>
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<td>Languages;</td>
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<td>Twenty students who</td>
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<td>studied in higher education institutions in Kazakhstan and abroad participated in the research interview: 13 of them preferred not to be identified in the research; the rest 7 students’ names are listed below.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bekmurat, Zh., undergraduate student at Purdue University, USA,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• A faculty member at Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations &amp; World Languages who graduate both from a higher education institution in Kazakhstan and abroad; • The researcher was not able to present the interview results of seven people due to the absence of consent forms;</td>
<td>previously studied at, Kazakhstan; • Batayev, A., student at Purdue University, USA, previously studied at Kazakh-British technical University, Kazakhstan; • Saniya Kartayeva, a graduate student, University of Western Ontario, Canada; • Nazerke Sadybekova, studied both at Kazakh-British Technical University &amp; a Public University in the Netherlands; • Sholpan Tursunbayeva, a graduate student at Cesar Ritz University in Switzerland, previously studied in Kazakh</td>
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<td>Public information</td>
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<td>I. Websites:</td>
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- National University named after Al-Farabi;
- Saken Akhmetov, MSc in Jurisprudence, currently academic advisor;
- Meirgul Alpyshbaeva, a student at Michigan State University;
(2009);

II. Articles:

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   http://www.educontrol.kz/ru/attestacija_nauchnykh_i_nauchno_pedagogicheskikh_kadrov/


   


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