



**INDEPENDENT AGENCY FOR QUALITY  
ASSURANCE IN EDUCATION (IQAA)**

## **THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

# **Some Aspects of Ethics and Academic Integrity in Higher Education Institutions in Kazakhstan: Problems and Prospects**

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## **Introduction**

Kazakhstan's higher education system has undergone significant transformations since 2010, when the country joined the Bologna Process. These transformations were aimed at improving the quality, competitiveness and integration of Kazakhstan's educational services into the European Higher Education Area. Among the most important innovations introduced in recent years is the granting of autonomy to HEIs in managing their activities, including in defining their mission, goals, strategies, programmes, standards, resources and partners. And the expansion of academic freedom has not only enabled HEIs to develop quality programmes and improve the working conditions of teachers and the prestige of the profession, but has also given them greater responsibility. In this context, the development of a culture of quality in higher education is becoming increasingly important. Educational institutions should not only provide services, but also actively increase their responsibility for the quality of education. In this context, one of the key mechanisms for ensuring a high level of education is the observance of ethics and principles of academic integrity.

Accreditation, in turn, reinforces its role as a tool for quality assurance and ethical standards in education. It contributes to the development of quality culture in educational organisations, encouraging them to self-assessment, self-improvement and innovation. Ethical aspects of quality assurance in HEIs play an important role as they reflect the values, principles and norms of behaviour that should be observed by all participants in the educational process. Ethics and academic integrity are an integral part of the quality of education, determining the credibility, reputation and prestige of HEIs, as well as contributing to the formation of civic responsibility and professional competence in graduates.

It is important to note that one of the standards of institutional accreditation agency IQAA is the standard 'Ethics and Academic Integrity'. The introduction of a separate this standard in the Agency's standards and criteria for institutional accreditation in 2019 was due to the establishment of the Academic Integrity League of Kazakhstan in 2018, although the criteria of academic integrity were present in the Agency's standards earlier, but it was important to put special emphasis on this component so that HEIs: administration, faculty, staff and students pay special attention to the defining values in the higher education system. This standard takes into account the ethical aspects of quality assurance in HEIs and assesses them on the basis of objective indicators and evidence. In addition, accreditation encourages HEIs to participate in national and international initiatives to promote ethics and academic integrity, such as.

Thus, accreditation plays an important role in raising ethical awareness and behaviour in higher education, ultimately contributing to the quality, competitiveness of HEIs and international integration of educational services.

## **1. Ethical aspects of ensuring the quality of education in higher education institutions**

This case study focuses on ethical aspects of quality assurance in HEIs in Kazakhstan, based on external audit reports of institutional accreditation and information on official resources. For comparison, 14 HEIs in Kazakhstan that passed institutional accreditation in 2022 and 2023 were selected.

The analysis was carried out according to the following criteria:

- Corporate governance mechanisms in HEIs
- Availability and accessibility of internal acts regulating ethics and academic integrity in HEIs.
- Availability and effectiveness of mechanisms to control and counteract violations of ethics and academic integrity.
- Availability and quality of training and professional development on ethics and academic integrity for students, faculty and staff of HEIs.
- Availability and level of satisfaction and involvement of students, faculty and employers in the process of ensuring the quality of education and compliance with ethical standards and principles in HEIs.

### **1.1 Mechanisms of corporate governance in higher education institutions**

Since Kazakhstan's accession to the Bologna Process, Kazakhstan's universities have been introducing corporate governance principles to ensure collegial responsibility, trust and openness. For more than a dozen years, various models and practices of corporate governance have been introduced - Supervisory Boards, Boards of Trustees, Boards of Directors. Let us consider what governance mechanisms are applied in the analysed HEIs.

According to the external audit reports in 5 out of 14 analysed HEIs (Karaganda University named after academician E.A.Buketov, South Kazakhstan University named after M.Auezov, Taraz Regional University named after M.H.Dulati, Atyrau Oil and Gas University named after Safi Utebaev, Almaty Technological University) the Boards of Directors function as a corporate governance body. According to experts' information, Atyrau Oil and Gas University and Almaty Technological University also have Boards of Trustees. However, only four universities (Karaganda University named after Academician E.A.Buketov,

Atyrau Oil and Gas University named after Safi Utebaev, South Kazakhstan University named after M.Auezov, Taraz Regional University named after M.H.Dulati) have information on the work of the Board of Directors (Regulations, composition and other) on their official websites. There is no information about the Board of Directors on the website of Almaty Technological University, and information about the Board of Trustees is incomplete. It includes information on the Chairman of the Board of Trustees, the work plan of the Board, but there is no information on the composition of the Board.

In two HEIs (Academy of Physical Culture and Mass Sports, Shymkent University) experts noted that the body of corporate governance is the Supervisory Boards. But there is no information about the work of the Boards on the websites of both universities. Turan-Astana University stated that the Board of Trustees is functioning. According to the information from the official resource of the University, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees is Judge of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan T.A.Kozhan, there is no information about the full composition of the Board.

In the remaining six HEIs the highest collegial governance body is the Academic Council.

As can be seen from the above analysis, HEIs practice different models of HEI management. Some HEIs traditionally have Academic Councils as a collegial governance body, some HEIs combine both models. These are mainly HEIs with the legal status of ‘Non-profit joint stock company’, where the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan acts as the sole shareholder. The interaction between the Academic Council and the Board of Directors through coordination, informing, consulting and making joint decisions on key issues can provide a balance between efficiency, collegiality, transparency and quality of HEI management. And this, as practice shows, is the optimal solution of HEI management, the main thing is to comply with the established norms and rules for the function, composition, procedure of formation and powers of the Academic Council and the Board of Directors.

As can be seen from the information taken from the official resources of the HEIs under review and other HEIs with NAO status, some HEIs do not follow the Regulation on the Board of Directors in terms of the fact that a representative of the body performing the functions of the sole executive body cannot be the Chairman of the Board of Directors at the same time, as this may lead to a conflict of interest and violation of the principles of honesty, trust, fairness and responsibility in the management of the university. For example, in two HEIs out of 14 under review, the chairpersons of the Board of Directors are representatives of the senior staff of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. Vice-Minister of Science and Higher Education D.Akhmet-Zaki is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Taraz Regional University named after M.H.Dulati, and the Chairman of the Committee

for Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan A.Toibaev is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of South Kazakhstan University named after M.Auezov.

A positive practice of university management in Karaganda University named after academician E.A.Buketov is the introduction of a system of evaluation of the Board of Directors, Management Board, as well as other structural units, which allows to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the work of structural units, to adjust the direction of their activities, to improve the interaction of structural units.

In addition to the Academic Council and the Board of Directors, the Atyrau University of Oil and Gas named after Safi Utebayev also has a Board of Trustees chaired by the Akim of Atyrau region. The Board of Trustees of the University is a permanent collegial advisory body of self-government, uniting the trustees on the basis of their common desire to make a feasible contribution to the development of the university; to contribute to the formation and implementation of its strategy, to increase competitiveness in the domestic and international educational services market.

## **1.2 Availability and accessibility of internal acts regulating ethics and academic integrity in HEIs**

One of the important criteria for a high level of education quality is compliance with the norms of academic honesty. In 2018, the League of Academic Integrity was established in Kazakhstan to improve and enhance the quality of education by promoting and implementing the ten fundamental principles of academic integrity. Three HEIs out of 14 considered in this case study are members of the League. These are M.Auezov South Kazakhstan University, Buketov Karaganda University and Safi Utebayev Atyrau University of Oil and Gas, which enforce clear, fair and objective standards of academic integrity, citation and behavioural rules, and strive for high anti-corruption standards.

The analysis of the external audit reports has shown that all HEIs have developed to different degrees internal regulatory documents governing ethics and academic integrity in HEIs, such as rules of academic integrity, codes of ethics, anti-corruption standards and policies, etc. For example, M.Auezov South Kazakhstan University has developed 8 internal normative acts, including «Model rules for scientific anti-corruption expertise of internal acts and drafts of internal acts», and Turan-Astana University has three – «Code of Academic Integrity», «TAU Code of Corporate Culture» and «Key Corporate Values». Internal regulations are posted by HEIs on their official websites for accessibility to up-to-date information for students, faculty and staff. Of the 14 HEIs under review, the Kazakh National University of Arts was recommended to place in public access a guide on ethical use of library and information resources for students of the university, and the Academy

of Physical Culture and Mass Sports to develop an internal document on checking written works for borrowings.

To the above recommendations of experts according to the analysis of official resources we can add a recommendation to HEIs to synchronise all internal regulatory documents, as well as information on the directions of implementation of academic integrity and ethics in all languages of the site. This will avoid misunderstanding, confusion and mistrust among students and teachers who do not speak Kazakh or Russian. It also helps to maintain the reputation of the university in the eyes of international partners and organisations. It is important to ensure equal access to information for all participants of the educational process and to regularly update and check the content of the website in different languages.

### **1.3 Mechanisms to control and counteract violations of ethics and academic integrity**

The external evaluation of HEIs' educational activities has shown that universities use various tools to ensure ethics and academic integrity. These include Ethics Councils, compliance services, Rector's Blog, telephone numbers and trust boxes, anti-plagiarism programmes. All these mechanisms are used in the universities under review to varying degrees of effectiveness. The experience of three universities-members of the League of Academic Integrity (M. Auezov South Kazakhstan University, Karaganda State University, M. Auezov Karaganda University) is of interest here. M. Auezov, Karaganda University named after Academician K.E. Buketov and Atyrau University of Oil and Gas named after Safi Utebaev), which demonstrate high standards in the field of ethics and academic integrity. Membership in the Academic Integrity League provides access to best practices and resources, as well as sharing experience with other HEIs. Therefore, the positive practices of these HEIs in the area of efficiency of control mechanisms and counteraction to violations of ethics and academic integrity should be adopted by other HEIs. This is also the effective work of the anti-corruption compliance service, which should not only ensure compliance with anti-corruption legislation, but also promote the values of integrity and ethics. The work of such a collegial body to ensure ethics and academic integrity as the Ethics Council, which considers appeals from staff and students, initiates disciplinary measures and promotes the formation of principles of integrity and other things.

For example, at Atyrau University of Oil and Gas named after Safi Utebayev employees sign anti-corruption commitments, at South Kazakhstan University named after M. Auezov conduct anti-corruption expertise of internal acts, at Karaganda University named after academician E.A. Buketov anti-corruption

compliance service closely cooperates with the anti-corruption service of the region, «Sanaly urpaq» office (project office) is constantly active in the field of anti-corruption.

One of the principles of academic integrity includes mandatory plagiarism checking of all written work submitted for academic and research purposes. Universities use various tools such as Anti-Plagiarism, Turnitin, Plagiarism Detector, Unicheck and others to ensure the originality of students' work. Some universities (M.Auezov South Kazakhstan University, M.H.Dulati Taraz Regional University, Atyrau University of Oil and Gas named after Safi Utebayev) have also introduced online proctoring systems to conduct examinations online using web cameras and special software to track students' actions.

However, the analysis of the reports revealed shortcomings in the implementation of mechanisms for controlling and counteracting violations of ethics and academic integrity in universities. Based on the opinion of external experts, the following problem areas were identified in different universities:

- lack of a full-time compliance officer unit, lack of a collegial body that considers ethical issues of students, faculty and staff;
- insufficient integration of university information systems, in particular, lack of connection between the anti-plagiarism system and platforms for teaching and research work;
- ineffective feedback mechanisms, which do not allow to promptly collect and analyse data on the results of the examination session and satisfaction of students, teachers and staff (Atyrau University of Oil and Gas named after Safi Utebaev);
- low availability of university management to address issues and problems arising from stakeholders (Shymkent University).

In addition, the data of external audit reports and analysis of official websites of universities did not show sufficient transparency and accountability in anti-corruption activities of universities. In particular, there is no information about the identified violations, measures taken, consequences and the degree of satisfaction of the parties on the results of consideration of appeals. In order to eliminate doubts about the objectivity, fairness and effectiveness of the work of collegial bodies that consider ethical issues of students, teachers and staff, universities should increase transparency and accountability in anti-corruption activities by publishing detailed statistics, analyses and feedback on reviewed cases on their websites.



#### **1.4 Professional development on ethics and academic integrity for university students, faculty and staff**

The analysis of the external audit reports has shown that in order to raise awareness and competence of the participants of the educational process in the field of academic culture, values and norms, as well as to familiarise them with the rules and procedures governing this area higher education institutions organise various courses, seminars, trainings and webinars for students, teachers and staff on academic integrity and ethics. Universities organise various courses, seminars, trainings and webinars for students, faculty and staff on academic integrity and ethics. Academic Integrity League member universities collaborate with other universities and organisations to share experiences and best practices in academic integrity and ethics. Six out of fourteen analysed HEIs have developed and approved «Anti-Corruption Standards», three have developed and approved «Anti-Corruption Policy». Various activities are used to implement these documents. Among them are seminars for deans, heads of departments, heads of structural units and students. The principles of information openness, accessibility, involvement and transparency of procedures are also emphasised. This includes allocation of places in student dormitories, distribution of vacant state grants, as well as competitive procedures. In addition, higher education institutions organise meetings of students and teachers with representatives of the Anti-Corruption Agency, consultants from other departmental organisations and public figures. Discussions and tutorials are organised for students on the topics «Academic Integrity», «Let's Say No to Corruption!», «Clean Session», etc.

However, despite the fact that HEIs are actively engaged in preventing and combating corruption in the educational sphere using a variety of forms and methods of work, there are HEIs that were recommended by external experts to pay attention to professional development of compliance officers.

#### **1.5 Existence and level of satisfaction and involvement of students, teachers and employers in the process of ensuring the quality of education and compliance with ethical norms and principles in HEIs**

The analysis of data from external audit reports revealed that in order to assess the quality of education and students' satisfaction with the educational process, HEIs conduct regular monitoring and analysis of the quality of educational programmes, learning outcomes and satisfaction of students, teachers and employers.

Universities apply a variety of tools to assess and improve their performance. Among them we can highlight the self-assessment model, internal audits, SWOT-

analysis and others. Special attention is paid to questionnaires of various stakeholder groups: staff, teachers, students, graduates and employers. Questionnaires provide feedback on the quality of educational programmes, teaching staff, student support and graduate employment. The results of the questionnaires are analysed by special units and used to make decisions on adjusting HEIs' activities. For example, in some HEIs, the questionnaire 'Teacher in the eyes of students' influences financial incentives for teachers. Thus, HEIs demonstrate their interest in increasing the level of satisfaction of all participants of the educational process and compliance with ethical norms and principles.

Another more formal and responsible way of involving students, teachers and employers in the process of ensuring the quality of education and compliance with ethical standards and principles in HEIs is participation in commissions and councils. Participation in commissions and councils implies that representatives of these groups have the right to vote and influence decision-making on various issues related to educational activities, such as development and accreditation of educational programmes, evaluation and certification of teachers, consideration of complaints and appeals, development and control of compliance with the code of ethics. The analysis of external audit reports has shown that in most of the HEIs under review, students and teachers participate in the work of collegial management bodies, Ethics Councils, various commissions, actions, etc. The external auditors note that students and teachers participate in the work of collegial management bodies, Ethics Councils, various commissions, etc. However, external experts note the low activity of students - members of the Academic Council, Academic Quality Council in discussing issues and representing the interests of the student community. This may indicate low motivation and involvement of students in the process of ensuring the quality of education and compliance with ethical norms and principles in HEIs and affect their creative and critical thinking. Therefore, HEIs should increase students' motivation and engagement in academic integrity and ethics by using various forms of encouragement, recognition, feedback and support, and by developing students' independent and collaborative learning skills.

## **2. Inferences**

### **2.1 Strengths of Ethical Aspects of Quality Assurance in Kazakhstani HEIs:**

- The Kazakhstani League of Academic Integrity operates in the country, whose mission is to improve and enhance the quality of education in the country by promoting and implementing the ten fundamental principles of academic integrity;
- various principles of corporate governance have been introduced in all HEIs;

- internal normative acts regulating ethics and academic integrity in HEIs and regulating the rights and obligations of all participants of the educational process, as well as procedures for the prevention and resolution of ethical dilemmas and conflicts have been developed and implemented;

- HEIs have collegial bodies (Ethics Councils, Disciplinary Councils, etc.) responsible for the development, implementation and control of compliance with codes of ethics and quality of education, as well as for the consideration of complaints and appeals on ethical violations;

- HEIs conduct regular monitoring and analysis of the quality of educational programmes, learning outcomes and satisfaction of students, teachers and employers.

## **2.2 Recommendations**

In drawing up the recommendations, the Independent Agency for Quality Assurance in Education has taken into account the specificities of higher education institutions and at the same time has endeavoured to focus on general problems of ethical aspects of quality assurance in education in general.

1. Strictly observe the principles of honesty, trust and responsibility in the management of the university. A representative of the body performing the functions of the sole executive body should not simultaneously hold the position of the Chairman of the Board of Directors. This will help to avoid conflicts of interest and ensure more transparent management.

2. The composition of the Board of Directors should be diverse, including representatives from different areas, to ensure more objective decision-making and prevent conflicts of interest.

3. HEIs should observe public accountability and publish information on the composition and activities of the Board of Directors on official HEI resources.

4. Synchronise all internal regulatory documents as well as information on the directions of implementation of academic integrity and ethics in the three languages of the website.

5. In order to eliminate doubts about the objectivity, fairness and effectiveness of collegial bodies that consider ethical issues of students, faculty and staff, HEIs should increase transparency and accountability in anti-corruption activities by providing detailed statistics, analyses and feedback on reviewed cases on their websites.

6. Increase motivation and involvement of students, faculty and staff in academic integrity and ethics through various forms of encouragement, recognition, feedback and support.

7. Organise regular trainings, seminars, webinars and conferences on ethics and quality of education for professional development of HEI staff

## **Conclusion**

Based on the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that HEIs in Kazakhstan have different levels of understanding of ethical aspects of ensuring the quality of education, depending on their mission, objectives, resources and needs. It is important that HEIs choose those mechanisms that correspond to their goals and objectives, as well as take into account the opinions and interests of all participants of the educational process. This is the only way to achieve high quality education and compliance with ethical norms and principles in Kazakhstani HEIs.

## List of sources used

1. External audit reports of HEIs that have passed the procedure of institutional accreditation in the Independent Agency for Quality Assurance in Education.
2. Official websites of higher education institutions:
  - 1) Academy of Justice under the Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan:  
<https://academy.sud.kz>
  - 2) Academy of Physical Culture and Mass Sports:  
<https://apems.edu.kz>
  - 3) International Taraz Innovation Institute:  
<https://htii.edu.kz>
  - 4) Astana International University:  
<https://www.aiu.kz>
  - 5) Taraz Regional University named after M.Kh. Dulati:  
<https://dulaty.kz>
  - 6) Shymkent University:  
<https://univershu.edu.kz>
  - 7) Karaganda University named after Academician E.A. Buketov:  
<https://buketov.edu.kz>
  - 8) M. Auezov South Kazakhstan University:  
<https://auezov.edu.kz>
  - 9) «Miras» University:  
<https://miras.edu.kz>
  - 10) Atyrau University of Oil and Gas named after S. Utebaev:  
<https://aogu.edu.kz>
  - 11) Almaty Technological University:  
<https://atu.edu.kz>
  - 12) Kyzylorda «Bolashak» University:  
<https://bolashak-edu.kz>
  - 13) «Turan-Astana» University:  
<https://tau-edu.kz>
  - 14) Kazakh National University of Arts:  
<https://kaznui.edu.kz>

## Appendix 1

List of externally audited universities between 2022 and 2023 considered for thematic analysis

1. The Academy of Justice under the Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan
2. Academy of Physical Culture and Mass Sports
3. International Taraz Innovation Institute
4. International University of Astana
5. Taraz Regional University named after M.H. Dulati
6. Shymkent University
7. Karaganda University named after academician E.A. Buketov
8. M. Auezov South Kazakhstan University
9. «Miras» University
10. Atyrau University of Oil and Gas named after S. Utebaev
11. Almaty Technological University
12. Kyzylorda University «Bolashak»
13. «Turan-Astana» University
14. Kazakh National University of Arts