



## The Quality Management System in Kyrgyzstan: Achievements and Challenges

Chynarkul Ryskulova

### Abstract

Kyrgyzstan implemented a new system of quality assurance through independent accreditation agencies in 2016. Poor management of the accreditation process, insufficient faculty training, and misunderstanding of the essence of quality culture present serious challenges. The absence of institutional research structures and specialized professional accreditation agencies are the main issues.

The contemporary higher education system in the Kyrgyz Republic has been shaped by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the implementation of the Bologna Process in Europe, and the influence of international donor organizations. Currently, there are 73 higher education institutions (33 public and 40 private) with 219,030 students in the country. The system faces economic and political instability, and is characterized by corruption and low quality.

Kyrgyzstan does not meet the territory requirements of the Bologna Process but it follows some of its principles. The ministry of education and sciences introduced changes in the higher education system such as a three-tier structure of academic degrees, European credit hour system, new student-centered curricula with competency-based education, and independent accreditation of educational institutions based on legal documents and amendments to the Law on Education of the Kyrgyz Republic. The law was first adopted in 1992 and subsequently amended in 1997, 2003, and 2013. In addition, various concepts, regulations, and policies were adopted during the 30 years of independence. According to the legislation, the state is responsible for quality assurance in higher education.

### Achievements and Challenges of Independent Accreditation

Six years have passed since Kyrgyzstan implemented a new quality assurance system through independent accreditation of higher education institutions aimed at quality assurance and integration into the European Higher Education Area. The National Accreditation Board of the ministry of education and sciences in the Kyrgyz Republic recognized five local independent accreditation agencies and one Kazakhstani agency for quality assurance in education. Local independent accreditation agencies work in close cooperation with international organizations such as the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA), TEMPUS (European Union), the Central Asian Network for Quality Assurance (CANQA), Quality of Engineering Education in Central Asia (QUEECA), and the German Corporation for International Cooperation Educational Organization (GIZ). All of them have supported local agencies in implementing independent accreditation in Kyrgyzstan. The implementation of accreditation should allow educational institutions to create mechanisms for continuously improving the quality of education.

The transition from a Soviet approach to quality control to new quality assurance practices used in the European Higher Education Area was not smooth. There have been challenges with implementation, including poor management of the accreditation process, insufficient faculty training, and misunderstanding of the essence of quality culture. The Soviet state attestation system was based on input assessment, while the new independent accreditation is based on outcome assessment focused on student learning. The main challenge in assessing the quality of educational programs is the shift from input assessment to outcome assessment.

University professors and administrators did not fully understand the purpose of each accreditation standard due to lack of training; some of the standards and criteria of accreditation were confusing and repeated from standard to standard. The guidelines for self-study were not prepared well and ended up with confusing language and misused words because of poor translation from English into Russian. For example, the word *faculty* was translated into Russian as *department* (since *department* in Russian is *fakultet*), and *quality culture* was interpreted as ethical behavior of professors in the classroom, which might mislead accreditors, researchers, and university faculty.

Poor management of the accreditation process at different levels—whether at the level of accreditation agencies or higher education institutions (HEIs)—resulted in misunderstandings of accreditation purposes and standards. The whole process took a lot of faculty time and energy. Not all accreditors are good at evaluating research, teaching methods, and higher education management practices because accreditation agencies do just one- to three-day workshops to train experts on the new system, which is of course not enough. These newly certified accreditation experts cause some concerns about their qualifications and the quality of accreditation that they do. All educational programs are accredited even though there are no noticeable quality improvements, taking into account the endless public discussions about corruption and low quality of education in the post-Soviet period. For instance, a large-scale audit of government officials for the purpose of identifying those with fake diplomas demonstrates that some people still simply buy university diplomas.

### Current Issues in Quality Management

The main issues affecting the accreditation process are the absence of institutional structures (e.g., institutional research offices), lack of specialized professional accreditation agencies, and the existing mechanisms for HEIs to report on student learning. Due to the absence of institutional research offices, which could support institutional assessment and collect and analyze data about educational practices and internal quality control policies, HEIs collect data for accreditation just a couple of months before accreditation experts come for a site visit. This is a Soviet legacy of the state attestation process that promotes embellishment aimed to impress accreditors with nicely written internal assessment reports. In addition, Kyrgyzstan does not have independent specialized professional accreditation agencies because the accreditation system is under the control of the ministry of education and sciences. One accreditation agency cannot accredit all

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*Chynarkul Ryskulova is professor at the Division of Arts, Humanities and Communication at the American University of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan. E-mail: [ryskulova\\_ch@auca.kg](mailto:ryskulova_ch@auca.kg).*

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programs from various fields and inform society about the quality of education. Moreover, HEIs cannot promote institutional effectiveness and inform their stakeholders about the quality of their academic programs without institutional research offices that would systematically collect and analyze educational data and communicate this data for continuous improvement of faculty training and student learning.

### **Conclusion**

It is necessary for Kyrgyzstan to establish professional accreditation agencies that would conduct external evaluation of academic programs in various fields. It is also important to establish institutional research offices within HEIs to collect and analyze data about educational practices and internal quality control policies. Existing accreditation standards and criteria are not clear enough to participants of the accreditation process, and they require revision and improvement. HEIs and accreditation agencies need to improve the accreditation management system, retrain faculty, and promote the quality of education. ▲