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QUALITY ASSURANCE UNITS IN KAZAKHSTANI UNIVERSITIES AND THE QS WORLD TOP 100 UNIVERSITIES: A COMPARATIVE STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT. The establishment of internal quality assurance (QA) units has become a near-universal feature of university administration worldwide, yet little is known about how such units differ between higher education systems at different stages of development. Purpose – to map and compare dedicated quality assurance and institutional research units in 103 higher education institutions of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the 100 universities of the QS World University Rankings. Methodology – structured content analysis of official institutional websites in the Kazakh, Russian and English languages, recording unit presence, naming, staffing, declared functions and contact channels for 203 institutions, followed by keyword-assisted functional coding of unit mandates. Originality/value – the study offers the first census-level structural comparison of internal QA units between a post-Soviet higher education system and the universities of the global top 100, and provides an empirical benchmark for national quality assurance policy. Findings – Kazakhstani universities exhibit near-total structural isomorphism: a dedicated QA unit was identified in 102 of 103 institutions (99.0%), but the units are small (median of 3 staff members) and their declared functions concentrate on student surveys, accreditation support, ISO-based quality management systems, internal audit and academic integrity control. Among the QS Top 100, only 52% of universities maintain an identifiable stand-alone central unit; such units are substantially larger (median of 12 staff members) and are predominantly configured as institutional research and decision-support offices. The article concludes that Kazakhstani QA units operate mainly as compliance-oriented structures, whereas leading universities either embed quality in distributed governance or maintain analytics-driven institutional research capacity, and formulates recommendations for strengthening the analytic function of internal quality assurance in Kazakhstan.

KEYWORDS: quality assurance; institutional research; higher education; Kazakhstan; QS World University Rankings; institutional isomorphism; university governance

Қазақстандық университеттердегі және QS әлемдік ТОП-100 университеттеріндегі сапаны қамтамасыз ету бөлімшелері: салыстырмалы құрылымдық және функционалдық талдау

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АҢДАТПА. Сапаны қамтамасыз етудің ішкі бөлімшелерін құру бүкіл әлемде университеттік басқарудың дерлік жаппай элементіне айналды, алайда мұндай бөлімшелердің даму деңгейі әртүрлі жоғары білім жүйелері арасында қаншалықты ерекшеленетіні аз зерттелген. Зерттеудің мақсаты – Қазақстан Республикасының 103 жоғары оқу орнындағы және QS әлемдік университеттер рейтингінің 100 университетіндегі сапаны қамтамасыз ету және институционалдық зерттеулер бөлімшелерін картаға түсіру және салыстыру. Әдіснамасы – 203 ұйым бойынша бөлімшенің болуын, атауын, қызметкерлер санын, мәлімделген функциялары мен байланыс арналарын тіркей отырып, жоғары оқу орындарының ресми сайттарына қазақ, орыс және ағылшын тілдерінде жүргізілген құрылымдалған контент-талдау және бөлімшелер мандаттарын функционалдық кодтау. Зерттеудің бірегейлігі/құндылығы – жұмыс постсоветтік жоғары білім жүйесі мен әлемдік топ-100 университеттерінің ішкі сапаны қамтамасыз ету бөлімшелерін алғаш рет толық қамту негізінде құрылымдық тұрғыдан салыстырады және ұлттық сапаны қамтамасыз ету саясаты үшін эмпирикалық бағдар ұсынады. Зерттеу нәтижелері – қазақстандық жоғары

оқу орындары дерлік толық құрылымдық изоморфизмді көрсетеді: арнайы бөлімше 103 оқу орнының 102-сінде (99,0%) анықталды, алайда бөлімшелер шағын (медианасы – 3 қызметкер), ал олардың мәлімделген функциялары студенттерге сауалнама жүргізуге, аккредиттеуді сүйемелдеуге, ISO негізіндегі сапа менеджменті жүйелеріне, ішкі аудитке және академиялық адалдықты бақылауға шоғырланған. QS топ-100 университеттерінің тек 52%-ында жеке орталық бөлімше анықталды; мұндай бөлімшелер айтарлықтай ірі (медианасы – 12 қызметкер) және негізінен институционалдық зерттеулер мен шешімдерді талдамалық қолдау офистері ретінде ұйымдастырылған. Қазақстандық бөлімшелер негізінен сәйкестікті бақылау құрылымдары ретінде жұмыс істейтіні, ал жетекші университеттер сапаны не бөлінген басқару жүйесіне енгізетіні, не институционалдық зерттеулердің талдамалық әлеуетін дамытатыны туралы қорытынды жасалып, Қазақстанда ішкі сапаны қамтамасыз етудің талдамалық функциясын күшейту бойынша ұсыныстар тұжырымдалған.

ТҮЙІН СӨЗДЕР: сапаны қамтамасыз ету; институционалдық зерттеулер; жоғары білім; Қазақстан; QS әлемдік университеттер рейтингі; институционалдық изоморфизм; университеттік басқару

Подразделения обеспечения качества в Казахстанских университетах и университетах ТОП-100 мирового рейтинга QS: сравнительный структурный и функциональный анализ

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АННОТАЦИЯ. Создание внутренних подразделений обеспечения качества стало практически повсеместным элементом университетского управления, однако вопрос о том, насколько такие подразделения различаются между системами высшего образования, находящимися на разных этапах развития, остается малоизученным. Цель исследования – картирование и сравнение специализированных подразделений обеспечения качества и институциональных исследований в 103 вузах Республики Казахстан и в 100 университетах мирового рейтинга QS. Методология – структурированный контент-анализ официальных сайтов вузов на казахском, русском и английском языках с фиксацией наличия подразделения, его названия, численности сотрудников, заявленных функций и контактных каналов по 203 организациям с последующим функциональным кодированием мандатов подразделений. Оригинальность/ценность исследования – работа представляет первое сплошное структурное сравнение внутренних подразделений обеспечения качества постсоветской системы высшего образования и университетов мирового топ-100 и создает эмпирический ориентир для национальной политики обеспечения качества. Результаты исследования – казахстанские вузы демонстрируют почти полный структурный изоморфизм: специализированное подразделение выявлено в 102 из 103 вузов (99,0%), однако подразделения малочисленны (медиана - 3 сотрудника), а их заявленные функции сосредоточены на анкетировании студентов, сопровождении аккредитации, системах менеджмента качества на основе ISO, внутреннем аудите и контроле академической честности. Среди университетов топ-100 QS лишь 52% имеют идентифицируемое отдельное центральное подразделение; такие подразделения существенно крупнее (медиана - 12 сотрудников) и преимущественно организованы как офисы институциональных исследований и аналитической поддержки принятия решений. Сделан вывод о том, что казахстанские подразделения функционируют главным образом как структуры контроля соответствия, тогда как ведущие университеты либо встраивают качество в распределенное управление, либо развивают аналитическую функцию институциональных исследований; сформулированы рекомендации по усилению аналитической функции внутреннего обеспечения качества в Казахстане.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: обеспечение качества; институциональные исследования; высшее образование; Казахстан; мировой рейтинг университетов QS; институциональный изоморфизм; университетское управление.

INTRODUCTION. Over the past three decades, the establishment of internal quality assurance (QA) structures has become one of the most visible manifestations of the global quality movement in higher education. Prompted by the Bologna Process, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) [1], national accreditation regimes and the growing influence of global rankings, universities across very different systems have created offices, centers, departments and committees whose declared mission is to assure, monitor or enhance the quality of education [2]. The apparent convergence of organizational forms, however, may conceal deep divergence in what these units actually do, how they are resourced and whose interests they serve.

The quality assurance literature has long recognized that quality is a contested and stakeholder-relative concept. In their seminal typology, Harvey and Green distinguished quality as exception, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation [3], and subsequent scholarship has repeatedly shown that the operationalization of quality in institutional practice tends to gravitate toward accountability-driven, procedural definitions rather than transformative ones [4; 5]. A recurrent finding is the tension between two logics of internal quality work: a compliance logic, in which QA structures exist to satisfy external regulators, accreditors and auditors, and an enhancement logic, in which quality work is embedded in academic practice and oriented toward learning and organizational development [6; 7]. Empirical studies of quality managers suggest that the balance between these logics is shaped by the regulatory environment, the resources available to QA units and the units' position in institutional governance [8].

Parallel to, and largely separate from, the European quality assurance tradition, universities in North America developed the function of institutional research: the collection, analysis and reporting of data about the institution itself to support planning, policy formation and decision making [9; 10]. Institutional research offices are typically located close to the president or provost, staffed by analysts rather than inspectors, and evaluated by the usefulness of their intelligence rather than by conformity with external standards [11]. Terenzini's influential account describes institutional research as organizational intelligence requiring technical, issues-related and contextual competencies [10]. Although institutional research offices frequently support accreditation, their center of gravity is analytic decision support rather than compliance verification. The distinction between quality assurance as compliance and institutional research as intelligence provides the conceptual axis along which the units observed in this study are compared.

Neo-institutional theory predicts that organizations facing uncertainty and strong regulatory environments will converge on legitimated structural forms regardless of their technical efficiency, through coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism [12]. Studies of post-Soviet systems have documented all three mechanisms: the inheritance of centralized control traditions from the Soviet model [13; 14], the coercive weight of state attestation and licensing, and the mimetic pull of rankings and Bologna instruments [15]. Kazakhstan is a paradigmatic case. Since acceding to the Bologna Process in 2010, the country has created independent accreditation agencies, expanded institutional autonomy and explicitly linked accreditation status and ranking performance to state funding and licensing, creating powerful incentives for universities to display internationally legible quality assurance structures [16; 17]. Whether such displayed structures carry the sub-

stantive functions of their Western referents, or operate as ceremonial adoption decoupled from core academic processes, has not, to the author's knowledge, been examined empirically at the level of the whole system.

This article addresses that gap through a systematic comparative mapping of quality assurance and institutional research units in two complete populations: all 103 civilian higher education institutions of Kazakhstan and the 100 universities of the QS World University Rankings. Three research questions guide the analysis. First, how prevalent are dedicated QA units in each population? Second, how do the units compare in staffing and structural configuration? Third, what functional profiles do the units declare, and what do these profiles reveal about the underlying conception of quality at work? The study contributes the first census-level comparison of QA structures between a post-Soviet system and the global elite of research universities, connects the compliance-enhancement debate with neo-institutional theory and the institutional research tradition, and provides Kazakhstani policymakers and university leaders with a benchmark for rethinking the mandate and resourcing of internal QA structures.

MATERIAL AND METHODS OF RESEARCH. The study compares two complete populations rather than samples. The first population comprises the 103 higher education institutions of the Republic of Kazakhstan, including national, state, regional and private universities, academies and institutes; military and law-enforcement institutions were excluded because their organizational information is not publicly accessible. The second population comprises the 100 universities of the QS World University Rankings, used as an operational definition of the global elite of research universities; the QS ranking was chosen because it is the reference explicitly invoked in Kazakhstani policy discourse on university excellence.

Data were collected through structured content analysis of official institutional websites, following established procedures for website-based organizational research [18]. For each institution, a standard protocol recorded: (a) whether a dedicated unit responsible for quality assurance, quality monitoring or institutional research could be identified; (b) the name and web address of the unit; (c) the unit's declared functions, transcribed from mission statements, regulations and structural descriptions; (d) the number of staff, where staff listings or unit pages allowed a count; and (e) public contact channels. Searches were conducted in the Kazakh, Russian and English languages for the Kazakhstani population and in English for the international population. A unit was coded as present when the website identified a distinct organizational structure (office, department, center, directorate or standing committee) with an explicit quality assurance or institutional research mandate; generic references to a quality management system without an identifiable responsible structure were coded as absent.

The declared functions of each identified unit were coded into functional categories derived inductively from the material and consolidated with reference to the literature. For the Kazakhstani population, eight categories were used: student and stakeholder surveys; monitoring of educational programs and the study process; accreditation support; internal audit and inspection; analytics and reporting for management; ISO-based quality management systems; strategic planning support; and academic integrity and anti-corruption control. For the international population, five categories were used: institutional research and analytics; strategic planning and policy support; quality assurance and enhancement frameworks; external and statutory reporting including accreditation; and survey administration. Coding was keyword-assisted and subsequently reviewed manually by the author; descriptions were coded in their original language, and a unit could be assigned to multiple categories.

Three limitations follow from the design and are addressed transparently. First, website analysis captures declared structure and functions, not enacted practice; the results speak to how universities present their quality work, which is itself theoretically meaningful under an isomorphism framework, but interviews or surveys would be needed to assess actual behavior. Second, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence: for the international population, a coding of no dedicated unit means that no stand-alone central unit was publicly identifiable, which in many cases reflects a deliberate distribution of quality responsibilities across faculties, senates and national agencies rather than an absence of quality work. Third, staff counts derive from public listings and are available for 95 of 102 Kazakhstani units (for 18 units the source indicated a range, and the midpoint was used) and for 44 of 52 international units; counts should therefore be read as indicative, and results are reported using medians alongside means.

RESULTS AND THEIR DISCUSSION. Table 1 summarizes the prevalence of dedicated quality assurance and institutional research structures in the two populations. In Kazakhstan, a dedicated structure was identified in 102 of 103 institutions (99.0%); the only exception is an institution that lost its license and ceased operations during the observation period. Structural adoption of internal quality assurance in Kazakhstan is therefore effectively universal.

The picture among the QS Top 100 is markedly different. A dedicated, publicly identifiable central unit was found in 52 of 100 universities (52.0%). The 48 universities without an identifiable stand-alone unit cluster geographically and institutionally: they include most of the ranked universities of mainland China, Japan and South Korea, a large group of continental European universities in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Scandinavia, and several Australian institutions. In these systems, quality assurance is typically exercised through national evaluation agencies, faculty-level committees and senate structures rather than through a branded central office. The contrast is itself a finding: universal structural adoption in Kazakhstan coexists with a genuinely mixed organizational landscape at the top of the global rankings.

Table 1 – Presence of dedicated quality assurance or institutional research units

Indicator	Kazakhstan (n = 103)	QS Top 100 (n = 100)	Difference
Dedicated unit identified	102 (99.0%)	52 (52.0%)	+47.0 pp
No identifiable stand-alone unit	0	48 (48.0%)	
Not applicable (institution closed)	1 (1.0%)	0	

Note: compiled by the author on the basis of institutional websites

Where units exist, their scale differs sharply between the two populations (see Table 2). Kazakhstani QA units are small: across the 95 units with usable staffing information, the median is 3 staff members and the mean is 3.2, with a range from 1 to 11. Three-person units are the modal form, accounting for about half of the cases with exact counts (39 of 77). Only two institutions report units of more than ten staff. Among the QS Top 100 units with reported staffing (n = 44), the median is 12 and the mean is 19.7, with a range from 1 to 300; the upper extreme corresponds to a broad student services directorate that

also carries quality functions, and excluding it the mean remains 13.2. Even on the conservative median comparison, central quality and institutional research capacity in the leading universities is roughly four times larger than in Kazakhstan, in institutions that are also, on average, far larger and more complex.

Naming and structural location reinforce the contrast. Among the 52 international units, 28 (54%) carry names built around institutional research, planning, analytics or data (for example, offices of institutional research, planning and analysis, or academic strategy and data analytics), while 19 (37%) carry the word quality in their titles, and 9 (17%) are constituted as academic committees or councils of the senate rather than administrative offices. Kazakhstani units, by contrast, are overwhelmingly administrative departments and offices whose names reference quality assurance, quality management, monitoring or accreditation, frequently in direct lexical continuity with the vocabulary of certified quality management systems inherited from the ISO 9001 era.

Table 2 – Staffing of identified units

Indicator	Kazakhstan	QS Top 100
Units with staffing data	95 of 102	44 of 52
Median staff	3	12
Mean staff	3.2	19.7 (13.2 excluding one outlier)
Range	1 to 11	1 to 300
Modal unit size	3 staff (39 of 77 exact counts)	no single mode

Note: for 18 Kazakhstani units the source reported a staffing range and the midpoint was used; compiled by the author

Table 3 reports the share of units whose declared functions fall into each coded category. The Kazakhstani profile is dominated by four activities. Student and stakeholder surveys, most commonly anonymous questionnaires of the teacher through the eyes of the student type administered through campus information systems, are declared by 59% of institutions. Monitoring of educational programs and the study process, including audits of syllabi and compliance with state educational standards, appears in 56%. Accreditation support, referencing national agencies (IAAR, IQAA) and international agencies (ASIIN, FIBAA, ACQUIN, QAA, ABET, WFME), appears in 53%. Internal audit and inspection functions appear in 36%, and analytic reporting to management in 35%. Notably, 23% of institutions still describe their quality work in the vocabulary of certified ISO 9001 quality management systems, and 16% assign their QA unit explicit academic integrity and anti-corruption functions, including plagiarism control, clean session examination monitoring and corruption-risk questionnaires.

The functional profile of the international units is nearly the mirror image. Institutional research and analytics functions, described as the collection, integration, analysis and dissemination of institutional data in support of decision making, dominate at 52%, followed by strategic planning and policy support at 42%. Explicit quality assurance and enhancement framework functions appear in 27%, external and statutory reporting including accreditation in 15%, and survey administration in only 6%. In short, where the modal Kazakhstani unit surveys students, audits syllabi and prepares accreditation files, the modal top-100 unit produces analytics for university leadership.

The Kazakhstani pattern of 99% structural adoption combined with a median staffing of three is a textbook illustration of coercive and mimetic isomorphism [12]. National accreditation requirements, state attestation and the ESG-inspired expectations of the Bologna framework make the existence of an internal QA structure a condition of legitimacy, and universities have responded by universally displaying such structures [15].

The uniformity of the response, down to the modal three-person department administering biannual student questionnaires through the Platonus or Univer information systems, suggests strong field-level templating: institutions copy one another and the checklists of accreditation agencies rather than designing structures around their own strategic needs. At the same time, the small size of the units relative to their extraordinarily broad declared mandates, which routinely combine survey administration, syllabus audit, accreditation management, ISO documentation, integrity control and analytic reporting, raises the classic concern of ceremonial adoption: structures that satisfy external legibility while remaining too thinly resourced to transform internal practice.

Table 3 – Declared functional profile of identified units (share of units coded in each category)

Functional category	Kazakhstan (n = 103)	QS Top 100 units (n = 52)
Student and stakeholder surveys	59%	6%
Programme and study-process monitoring	56%	-
Accreditation and external review support	53%	15%
Internal audit and inspection	36%	-
Analytics and reporting for management	35%	52%
ISO-based quality management system	23%	-
Strategic planning and policy support	18%	42%
Academic integrity and anti-corruption control	16%	-
Quality assurance and enhancement framework	-	27%

Note: categories are not mutually exclusive; a dash indicates that the category was not part of the coding frame for that population or was not observed; compiled by the author

The functional comparison sharpens the compliance-enhancement distinction into a structural observation. Kazakhstani units are configured predominantly as compliance structures: their dominant activities verify conformity with external standards, with anti-corruption expectations, with examination discipline and with accreditation criteria. The prominence of academic integrity and anti-corruption functions is a distinctive systemic feature with no counterpart in the top-100 profile, reflecting both a genuine policy problem and the inheritance of an inspection-oriented control tradition from the Soviet administrative model [13; 14]. The international units, by contrast, are configured predominantly as organizational intelligence functions in Terenzini's sense [10]: offices of institutional research, planning and analytics whose product is decision support rather than conformity ver-

ification, and whose legitimacy rests on the usefulness of their analysis to leadership [11]. Where explicit quality assurance offices do appear among the top 100, notably in the United Kingdom, Hong Kong and Ireland, they operate within mature national frameworks and typically alongside, rather than instead of, a separate institutional research capacity.

That 48 of the world's top 100 universities display no stand-alone central QA unit is not evidence of neglected quality. Rather, it points to alternative architectures of quality governance: national evaluation agencies and accreditation bodies in France, Germany, the Netherlands and East Asia; senate and faculty committee systems in Australia and parts of Europe; and deeply institutionalized academic self-regulation. For Kazakhstani policy, the lesson is double-edged. On the one hand, the mere presence of a QA office is clearly not what distinguishes world-class universities. On the other hand, the universities that do maintain central units invest in them at a scale, and with an analytic orientation, that Kazakhstani institutions currently do not match. If Kazakhstani universities aspire to the decision-making sophistication of their ranking-defined referents, the developmental path runs less through additional compliance functions than through the professionalization of institutional research: data infrastructure, analyst capacity and a reporting line that treats quality data as strategic intelligence for rectorates and boards rather than as material for external files.

CONCLUSION. This study provides the first census-level structural comparison of internal quality assurance units between Kazakhstan and the QS World Top 100. It documents near-universal but thinly resourced, compliance-oriented QA structures in Kazakhstan (102 of 103 institutions, median of 3 staff members), and a heterogeneous international landscape in which only half of the leading universities maintain a central unit at all, and those that do configure it primarily as an institutional research and decision-support function several times larger than its Kazakhstani counterpart. The same organizational label thus hosts two different organizational logics: verification of conformity in one system, production of organizational intelligence in the other.

For Kazakhstan, the practical implication is not to abolish compliance functions, which respond to real regulatory and integrity demands, but to recognize that convergence with international practice, properly understood, requires building analytic capacity behind the structures that have already been so uniformly adopted. Concrete steps include consolidating institutional data infrastructure, investing in professional analyst positions within QA units, and repositioning the units' reporting so that quality data serve rectorates and boards as strategic intelligence. The results can be used by university leadership, accreditation agencies and the authorized body in the field of education when reviewing internal quality assurance requirements. Future research should triangulate the structural map presented here with interviews of QA practitioners and rectors, examine the relationship between unit configuration and institutional outcomes such as accreditation results and student satisfaction, and extend the comparison to other post-Soviet and middle-income systems to establish whether the compliance-oriented configuration identified here is a regional or a developmental phenomenon.

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