









# “Perceptions and practices of academic excellence: Insights from university stakeholders”

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# PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE: INSIGHTS FROM UNIVERSITY STAKEHOLDERS

## Abstract

The study analyzes how academic excellence is conceptualized within Kazakhstani universities, focusing on two key internal stakeholder groups: faculty members and administrative staff. While academic excellence has become a global priority, little empirical evidence exists on how it is interpreted in emerging higher education systems. The paper addresses this gap by examining the Kazakhstani case, where government-led excellence initiatives are still in their early stages. A quota-based survey was conducted across 42 universities, producing weighted responses from 832 faculty and 155 administrators. Quantitative data were processed with IBM SPSS Statistics 25, employing descriptive statistics, Welch's t-test, and two-way ANOVA to compare perceptions between the groups. Despite a broad consensus on the multidimensional nature of academic excellence (positive agreement averaged > 94%), the results reveal consistent differences in their interpretation of core parameters. Of the 32 indicators tested, only four showed no statistically significant difference between faculty and administrators: faculty numbers ( $p = 0.246$ ), academic reputation and stakeholder recognition ( $p = 0.701$ ), graduate employability and employer satisfaction ( $p = 0.106$ ), and student enrollment ( $p = 0.588$ ). Overall, administrators assigned systematically higher importance to institutional characteristics, enabling components, and barriers across all thematic blocks. Consistent with the conceptual framework integrating institutional and stakeholder perspectives, these patterns indicate that external policy pressures and role-specific responsibilities shape interpretations of excellence. These findings provide a data-driven basis for designing initiatives that couple system-level reforms with participatory governance and co-created metrics, thereby improving the translation of policy into practice.

## Keywords

academic excellence, higher education, stakeholder perceptions, university governance, performance management, Kazakhstan

## JEL Classification

I23, I28, O32

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, many governments worldwide have launched Academic Excellence Initiatives (AEIs) – targeted policies designed to enhance the quality and global competitiveness of their higher education systems. AEIs are linked to strategic national programs that provide concentrated funding and support to selected universities, aiming to transform them into world-class institutions (Salmi, 2009; Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Yudkevich et al., 2023). These initiatives vary in design, and although some have achieved notable success, others have faced significant challenges in implementation.

While AEIs are formulated top-down, their real effects depend on how internal stakeholders enact them in everyday academic and administrative work. Research comparing faculty and administrators reveals consistent differences in how each group perceives the institutional mission, organizational climate, and strategic priorities (Artyukhov & Chumachenko, 2025; Peterson & White, 1992; Kuo, 2009; Al-Omari

& Salameh, 2009; Lawrence & Ott, 2013; Xu, 2025). Misalignment between policy goals and stakeholder perceptions can result in symbolic compliance rather than substantive reform (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003; Casa Nova et al., 2018). This raises the scientific issue of how “academic excellence” is interpreted and operationalized by different employee groups.

The Kazakhstani case is particularly relevant in this context. The Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Kazakhstan introduced a new Academic Excellence Program in 2023, targeting 20 regional and pedagogical universities (Government of Kazakhstan, 2023). However, the notion of academic excellence remains relatively new in the country, and stakeholder understandings and support remain unclear (Kudaybergenova et al., 2024). This creates a critical research gap, as the success of such initiatives depends not only on funding and regulations but also on the alignment of stakeholder perceptions and practices. The study, therefore, addresses the lack of empirical evidence on how academic excellence is interpreted and enacted within Kazakhstani universities, an issue central to bridging the gap between policy intentions and actual university performance.

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## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

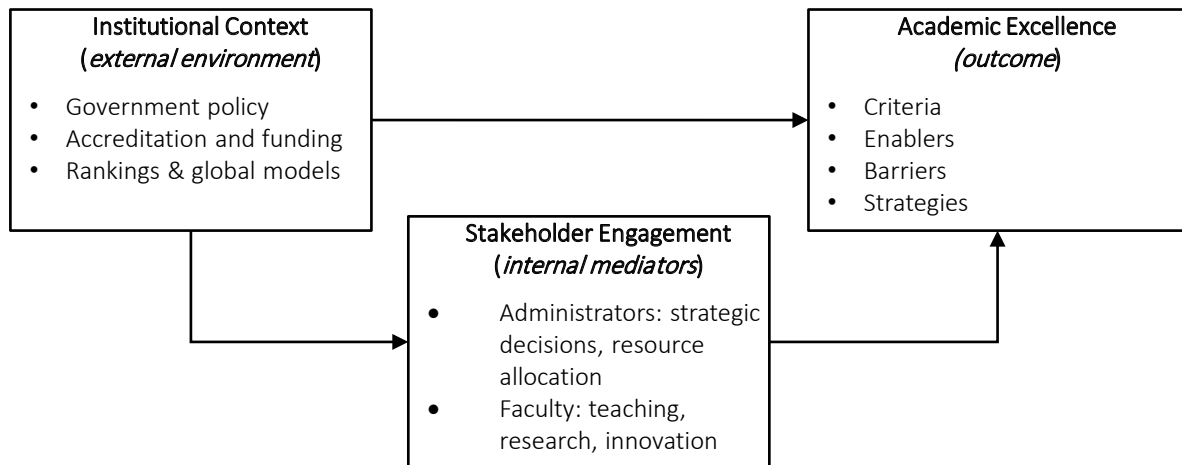
Academic excellence is widely recognized as a core goal of modern universities, encompassing not only high-quality research and teaching but also contributions to societal development and innovation. At its foundation, excellence reflects an institution’s capacity to attract top academic talent, secure sufficient resources, and deliver value through effective governance, research, and international engagement (Salmi, 2009; Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

Since 2000, more than 30 countries have implemented about 40 AEIs (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Yudkevich et al., 2023; Salmi & Froumin, 2013; Froumin & Lisyutkin, 2015). Notable examples include China’s Double First Class, Germany’s Excellence Strategy, and Japan’s Top Global University Project, all of which aim to improve institutional performance through targeted funding, research development, and governance reforms (Ying et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2018; Rider et al., 2020). Similar initiatives have emerged in countries such as South Korea, Malaysia, and Finland, where excellence strategies have been tailored to fit national governance models and policy objectives (Tirronen & Nokkala, 2009; Steele & Khalid Ali, 2014).

While the concept is often associated with global university rankings and competitive research outputs, its meaning can vary across institutional and national contexts (Vernon et al., 2018; Rider et al., 2020; Kudaibergenova & Serikkaliyeva, 2024;

Soediro et al., 2025). Some definitions emphasize excellence as high academic achievement, exemplified through strong institutional performance in rankings, successful educational programs, or student success in academic competitions (Hazelkorn, 2009; Makondo, 2012; Vasiliev, 2021). Others link it to scientific orientation, underscoring the development of research capacity among faculty and students as a central pillar (Li et al., 2008, 2020; Zhidebekkyzy et al., 2023).

Scientific literature reflects a growing recognition that academic excellence is a multidimensional construct. Indicators typically used to evaluate excellence include publication and citation metrics, competitive grant acquisition, graduate employability, international visibility, and innovation outputs such as patents or university spin-offs (Dehon et al., 2010; Chowdhury et al., 2016; Tijssen & Winnink, 2018). Structural and contextual factors, such as faculty qualifications, governance models, and institutional mission, also influence performance outcomes (Frenken et al., 2017; Kok & McDonald, 2017; Karpusha et al., 2025). A more holistic understanding of academic excellence also reflects contemporary priorities such as sustainability, social relevance, and interdisciplinary integration (Hussain et al., 2019; Olzhebayeva et al., 2024; Rašticová et al., 2025; de Villiers et al., 2025). Similarly, other scholars emphasize the university’s role in promoting excellence, shaping intellectual diversity, fostering inclusive learning environments, and contributing to the advancement of knowledge fields (Volosnikova et al., 2021; Callupe Cueva & Porras Rojas, 2024). This broad-



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework

er vision moves beyond traditional performance metrics, encouraging universities to align excellence not only with global competitiveness but also with long-term societal impact.

Theoretical frameworks provide useful lenses for analyzing how excellence is defined and enacted. Institutional theory suggests that organizations operate not only according to technical efficiency but also to conform to socially constructed norms, values, and expectations in their environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the context of higher education, these expectations often take shape through policies, accreditation systems, global rankings, and funding structures (Hsu et al., 2018; Amarante & Crubellate, 2020; Ramirez, 2010; Smolennikov et al., 2024). Prior studies show that this misalignment between external demands and internal practices may generate symbolic compliance, where institutions formally adopt excellence frameworks without fully embedding them into academic culture (Anafinova, 2020).

Complementing this view, stakeholder theory underlines that excellence is not achieved solely through external benchmarks but also through the actions and perceptions of internal actors (Freeman, 1984). Faculty and administrators, as key stakeholders, actively shape the meaning of excellence through their professional identities, roles, and values (Mainardes et al., 2010; Langrafe et al., 2020). While faculty often stress academic freedom, disciplinary standards, and the intrinsic value of education, administrators

typically prioritize strategic goals, institutional visibility, and performance indicators (Huang-Horowitz et al., 2024). Inclusive governance and dialogue between stakeholder groups can foster trust, legitimacy, and commitment to excellence (Shukla & Singh, 2016; Asiyai, 2014). This dual perspective suggests that academic excellence is best understood at the intersection of institutional pressures and stakeholder engagement, where external expectations are translated into internal practices.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that both external standards and internal stakeholder perceptions shape academic excellence. However, empirical evidence on how internal stakeholder perceptions unfold remains scarce, especially in higher education systems where excellence policies are relatively new.

To address this gap, the present study focuses on how faculty members and administrative staff in Kazakhstani universities conceptualize academic excellence, and how their perspectives converge or diverge. The analysis is guided by a conceptual framework that integrates institutional and stakeholder theories (Figure 1), highlighting how external pressures such as government policy, funding structures, and international rankings intersect with the interpretations and actions of internal actors. Within this framework, academic excellence is understood as an outcome shaped by criteria, enablers, barriers, and strategies, mediated by the interaction between institutional context and stakeholder engagement.

## 2. METHOD

This study employs a quantitative survey-based research design to investigate perceptions of academic excellence in higher education. The respondents were divided into two groups:

- Faculty members (FM) – academic staff, including professors, associate professors, and lecturers;
- Administrative staff (ADM) – university top management representatives, including rectors, vice-rectors, and deans.

A quota sampling strategy was chosen to ensure sufficient and analytically meaningful representation of key respondent subgroups. A total of 42 higher education institutions (HEIs) were selected, including 36 universities featured in international rankings such as Times Higher Education and QS World University Rankings, and 20 universities serving as bases for the creation of Academic Excellence Centers in Kazakhstan. These institutions jointly represent approximately half of Kazakhstan’s total academic staff and student population.

Quotas were constructed to ensure diverse representation across several key dimensions:

- 1) gender (male/female);
- 2) macro-regions (East, North, West, South, Central, and the capital cities);
- 3) institutional specialization (social sciences and humanities, natural sciences, STEM disciplines, and pedagogy); and
- 4) academic rank.

Particular attention was given to academic status, with the following target distribution among faculty members (FM): full professors (15%), associate professors with doctoral degrees (60%), and lecturers without advanced degrees (25%). Final quotas were primarily enforced by academic rank, while other characteristics were proportionally distributed based on staff composition within each institution.

The original unweighted sample included 1152 respondents, comprising 970 faculty members (FM) and 182 administrative staff (ADM). After applying post-stratification weighting based on quotas, the analytical sample consisted of 832 faculty members (FM) and 155 administrative staff (ADM), which were used for comparative statistical analysis.

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic profile of the respondents by group.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic profile of respondents by group (%)

Variable	Category	FM (n = 832)	ADM (n = 155)
Gender	Male	24.8	39.4
	Female	75.2	60.6
Age group	25-34	16.2	9.6
	35-45	31.5	39.1
	46-55	27.9	35.0
	56-65	19.9	13.6
	65 and older	4.5	2.8
Academic degree	Doctor of Science	5.9	11.0
	Candidate of Science	38.5	42.6
	Ph.D.	13.1	30.0
	Master	42.4	16.3

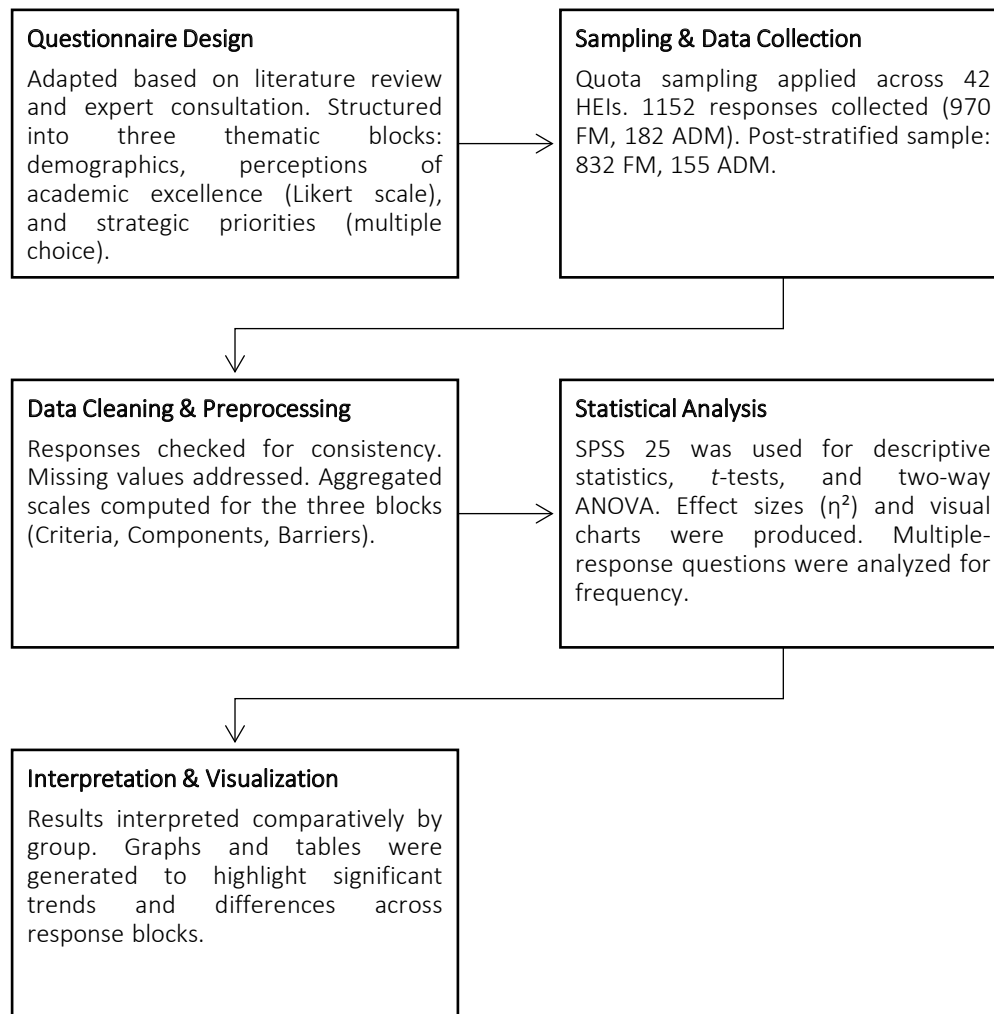
*Note:* Weighted frequencies used. Actual unweighted N = 1152 (970 FM, 182 ADM).

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first collected sociodemographic data (gender, age, academic degree, institutional affiliation) and variables for quota sampling. The second assessed perceptions of academic excellence, including criteria, enabling components, and barriers, measured on a 10-point Likert scale. The third examined views on strategic priorities for achieving excellence using multiple-choice items.

To ensure reliability, internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha across the Likert-scale sections (Table 2). All blocks demonstrated high reliability ( $\alpha > 0.85$ ), supporting the coherence of grouped items.

**Table 2.** Internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) of questionnaire blocks

No.	Domain	No. of items	$\alpha$ (FM)	$\alpha$ (ADM)
1	Criteria	15	0.981	0.978
2	Components	10	0.979	0.976
3	Barriers	7	0.907	0.864



**Figure 2.** Research workflow

Data were collected between April and October 2024 using a mixed-mode approach, which included both online surveys and face-to-face distribution at selected higher education institutions (HEIs). The survey instrument and procedures were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Almaty Management University (Protocol No. 4, April 15, 2024). All participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their involvement and assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Quantitative data were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics 25. Descriptive statistics summarized response patterns, while independent samples and Welch’s *t*-tests compared faculty (FM) and administrative staff (ADM). A two-way ANOVA was applied across the three thematic blocks (criteria, components, and barriers), and multiple-response items were examined using frequency distribu-

tions. Effect sizes and visualizations supported interpretation, with the research workflow presented in Figure 2.

### 3. RESULTS

To assess how respondents conceptualize academic excellence, participants rated six statements using a five-point Likert scale (from 1 - “Strongly Disagree” to 5 - “Strongly Agree”). The question was formulated as follows: “*To what extent do you agree that each of the following elements is a core component of the concept of academic excellence?*”

The following statements were presented:

- 1) refers to the overall activity of the university, not only the teaching process (S1);

- 2) associated with high academic achievements (e.g., rankings, program advancement, awards) (S2);
- 3) linked to research orientation and the development of research skills (S3);
- 4) involves accelerated institutional development supported by targeted funding and recruitment of top scholars (S4);
- 5) implies leadership qualities among students, faculty, researchers, and management, emphasizing practical application of knowledge and skills (S5);
- 6) promotes collaboration between regional universities and local employers (S6).

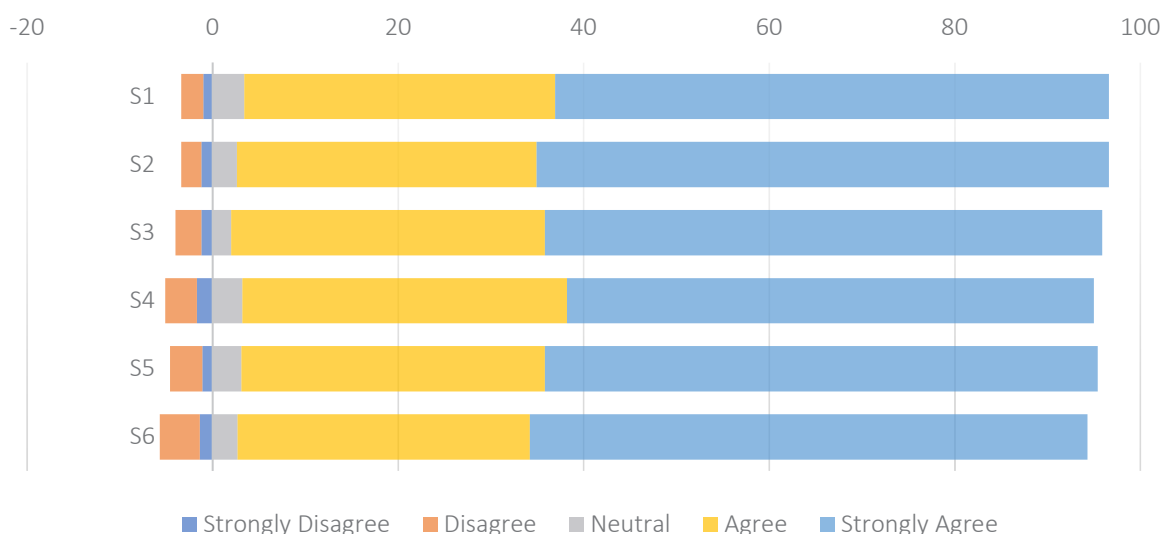
In contrast, FM responses were more evenly distributed, with a greater proportion choosing “agree” rather than “strongly agree.” For instance, on the statement regarding accelerated development through targeted funding (S4), 35.0% of FM selected “agree” and 56.8% “strongly agree,” whereas ADM preferred the “strongly agree” category (68.9%).

These differences imply that while both groups generally endorse the same components of academic excellence, administrative leaders tend to express stronger and more consistent agreement.

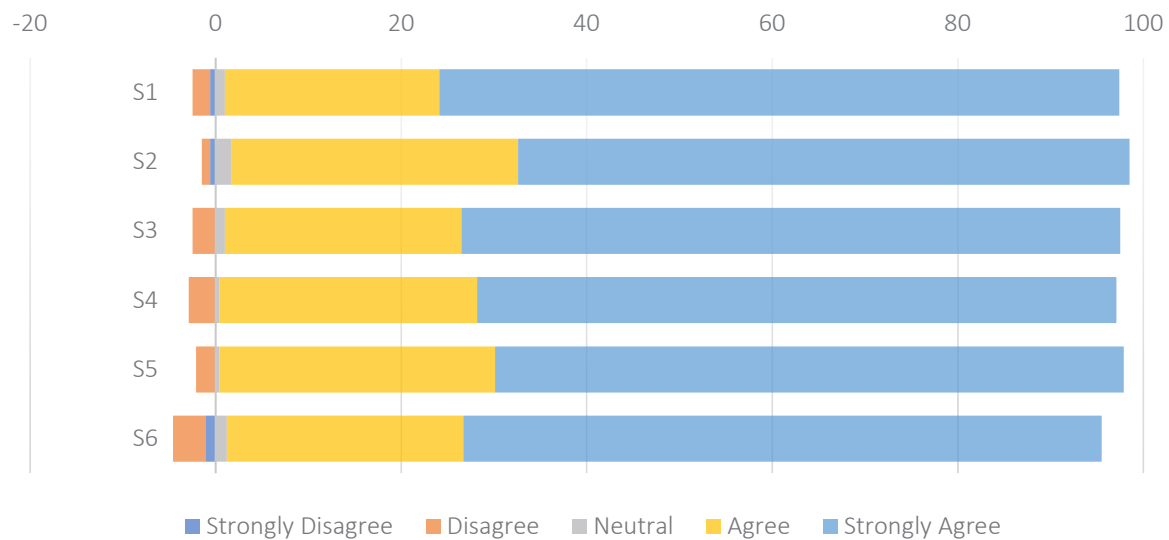
Respondents were asked to evaluate *to what extent each listed institutional characteristic reflects the concept of academic excellence*, using a 10-point scale (1 = not at all; 10 = fully reflects). Table 3 displays the means and standard deviations for both groups. Overall, most characteristics received relatively high scores, indicating a broad consensus about their relevance. Among faculty members (FM), the most highly rated indicators were graduate employability and employer satisfaction (M = 8.046), students’ academic achievements (M = 7.928), and university reputation (M = 7.871). Administrative staff (ADM) placed the highest emphasis on the availability of diverse academic specializations (M = 8.605), research productivity (M = 8.404), and graduate employability and employer satisfaction (M = 8.392). These results indicate slight but noticeable differences in strategic priorities between groups.

Figures 3 and 4 present the distribution of responses for faculty members (FM) and administrative staff (ADM), visualized using diverging stacked bar charts.

The majority of ADM respondents expressed strong agreement across all six statements. For example, 73.3% of ADM “strongly agreed” that academic excellence relates to the overall university mission beyond teaching (S1), compared to 59.7% of FM. Similarly, 71.0% of ADM “strongly agreed” that it is linked to the development of research capacity (S3), while only 60.1% of FM shared this view.



**Figure 3.** Perceptions of the academic excellence concept (FM group)



**Figure 4.** Perceptions of the academic excellence concept (ADM group)

The largest perceptual gaps ( $\Delta M$ ) between ADM and FM were found in the importance assigned to the share of international faculty ( $\Delta M = 1.029$ ) and breadth of academic specializations ( $\Delta M = 1.182$ ), with ADM consistently rating these factors higher. Only one criterion, “university academic reputation,” was rated slightly lower by ADM than FM ( $\Delta M = -0.083$ ). For clearer interpretation, cells exceeding a mean of 8.0 are highlighted.

Next, participants were asked to evaluate the importance of various components for achieving academic excellence, using a 10-point scale (1 = not important; 10 = highly important). As presented in Table 4, both faculty members (FM) and admin-

istrative staff (ADM) assigned high importance to most components, with ADM showing consistently higher scores across all indicators. The highest-rated aspects by ADM included academic integrity ( $M = 9.083$ ), quality of university infrastructure ( $M = 8.950$ ), and student involvement in research ( $M = 8.800$ ). Faculty members similarly valued academic integrity ( $M = 8.536$ ) and academic freedom ( $M = 8.192$ ), indicating broad consensus on these core values.

Notable perceptual differences between the two groups emerged in several areas. ADM participants rated autonomy and managerial independence ( $\Delta M = 0.974$ ), collaboration with leading

**Table 3.** Perceived importance of institutional characteristics defining academic excellence

Criteria	Mean (FM)	SD (FM)	Mean (ADM)	SD (ADM)	$\Delta M$ (ADM-FM)
University ranking positions	7.537	2.825	8.035	2.328	0.498
Institutional accreditation status	7.594	2.846	8.021	2.371	0.427
Specialized accreditation status	7.616	2.827	8.078	2.365	0.462
Students’ academic performance and achievements	7.928	2.677	8.324	2.306	0.396
Research productivity: conducted research, number of publications, citations	7.777	2.708	8.404	2.245	0.627
University research income	7.545	2.758	8.029	2.462	0.484
Share of international students	6.641	2.922	7.275	2.630	0.634
Share of international faculty/researchers	6.643	2.941	7.672	2.478	1.029
Number of university faculty members	6.954	2.882	7.223	2.591	0.269
University academic reputation and stakeholder recognition	7.871	2.716	7.788	2.408	-0.083
Graduate employability and employer satisfaction	8.046	2.643	8.392	2.393	0.345
Number of patents held by faculty (IP assets)	7.283	2.847	7.766	2.442	0.483
Number of enrolled students	7.258	2.784	7.384	2.632	0.126
Broad range of specializations within academic programs	7.423	2.817	8.605	2.160	1.182
Number of doctoral students	7.259	2.795	7.644	2.589	0.385

**Table 4.** Perceived importance of components for achieving academic excellence

Components	Mean (FM)	SD (FM)	Mean (ADM)	SD (ADM)	ΔM (ADM-FM)
Academic integrity of faculty and students	8.536	2.434	9.083	1.766	0.547
Equity and inclusiveness	7.924	2.563	8.542	2.033	0.618
Autonomy and managerial independence	7.757	2.611	8.731	1.899	0.974
Faculty academic freedom	8.192	2.443	8.668	1.896	0.476
Student involvement in research	8.053	2.450	8.800	1.756	0.747
Accessibility of top management for faculty and students	7.897	2.520	8.606	1.979	0.708
Quality of university infrastructure	8.314	2.445	8.950	1.684	0.635
Collaboration with leading international researchers	7.970	2.504	8.765	1.817	0.795
Contribution to regional development	7.970	2.527	8.644	1.914	0.673
Continuing education programs (online courses, open lectures)	7.773	2.519	8.379	2.021	0.607

**Table 5.** Perceived barriers to achieving academic excellence

Barriers	Mean (FM)	SD (FM)	Mean (ADM)	SD (ADM)	ΔM (ADM-FM)
High level of regulatory control by the Ministry (qualification requirements, state standards, etc.)	5.646	3.068	6.549	2.921	0.903
Insufficient university autonomy	5.533	2.999	6.700	2.683	1.168
Inefficient university governance	5.752	3.025	6.428	2.876	0.676
Low qualification level of faculty and researchers	5.818	3.068	6.855	2.674	1.037
Limited faculty involvement in university governance	5.910	3.033	6.696	2.671	0.786
Geographic location of the university	4.309	3.009	4.743	2.902	0.433
Underdeveloped infrastructure	5.978	3.059	6.858	2.648	0.880

international researchers ( $\Delta M = 0.795$ ), and student involvement in research ( $\Delta M = 0.747$ ) higher than FM respondents. Components with mean scores above 8.0 are highlighted for clarity of interpretation.

Participants were asked to assess potential barriers that may hinder progress toward academic excellence. Ratings were provided on a 10-point scale (1 = not a barrier; 10 = a very significant barrier). Table 5 reveals that administrative staff (ADM) consistently perceived barriers as more significant than faculty members (FM). The most pronounced difference was observed for “Insufficient university autonomy” (ADM:  $M = 6.700$ ; FM:  $M = 5.533$ ;  $\Delta M = 1.168$ ), followed by “Low qualification level of faculty and researchers” ( $\Delta M = 1.037$ ), and “High level of regulatory control by the Ministry” ( $\Delta M = 0.903$ ).

Overall, all listed barriers were evaluated by ADM as more pressing than by FM. The indicator “Underdeveloped infrastructure” also received relatively high scores from both groups, with ADM rating it at  $M = 6.858$  and FM at  $M = 5.978$ . Barriers with mean scores above 6.0 are highlighted.

Descriptive statistics of aggregated scales for each block (Criteria, Components, and Barriers) by group are provided in Appendix A.

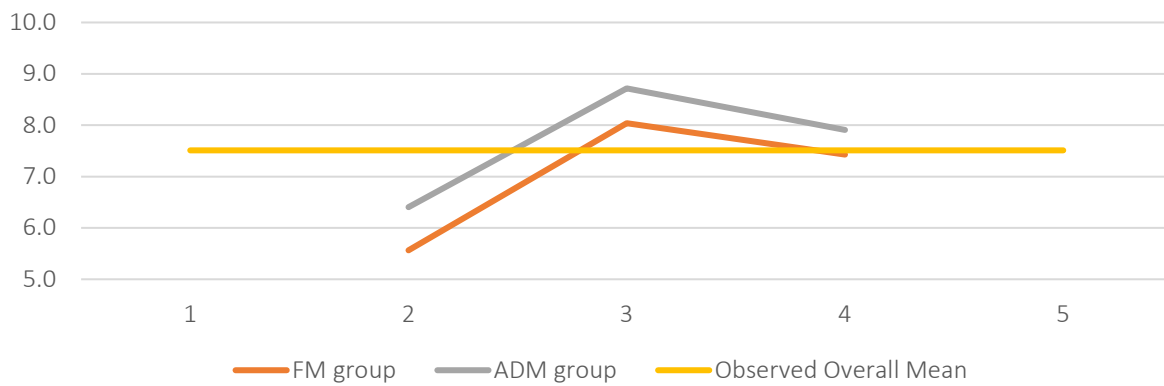
The line chart (Figure 5) presents estimated marginal means of faculty members (FM) and administrative staff (ADM) across three thematic blocks: Barriers, Components, and Criteria related to academic excellence.

A two-way ANOVA indicated statistically significant differences across thematic blocks and

**Table 6.** Summary of two-way ANOVA results

Factor	F	p-value	Partial $\eta^2$	Interpretation
Group	33.16	< .001	0.364	Significant difference by group
Block	123.83	< .001	0.810	Strong differences across blocks
Group × Block	0.83	0.441	0.028	No significant interaction

Note:  $R^2 = 0.829$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.814$ . Dependent variable: mean of Likert-scale ratings (1-10).



**Figure 5.** Estimated marginal means for each block

respondent groups (see Appendix B for full ANOVA table).

These findings make it evident that both the type of respondent and the thematic focus of the question significantly influenced the responses. In all three blocks, administrative staff consistently provided higher ratings than faculty members, indicating differing perceptions of academic excellence between the two groups. Additionally, the largest variation in ratings was observed across the thematic blocks themselves, indicating that respondents made clear distinctions between the structural definitions of excellence, important components, and institutional challenges. However, the interaction effect between group and block was not statistically significant, indicating that the pattern of differences between the two groups was similar across all blocks.

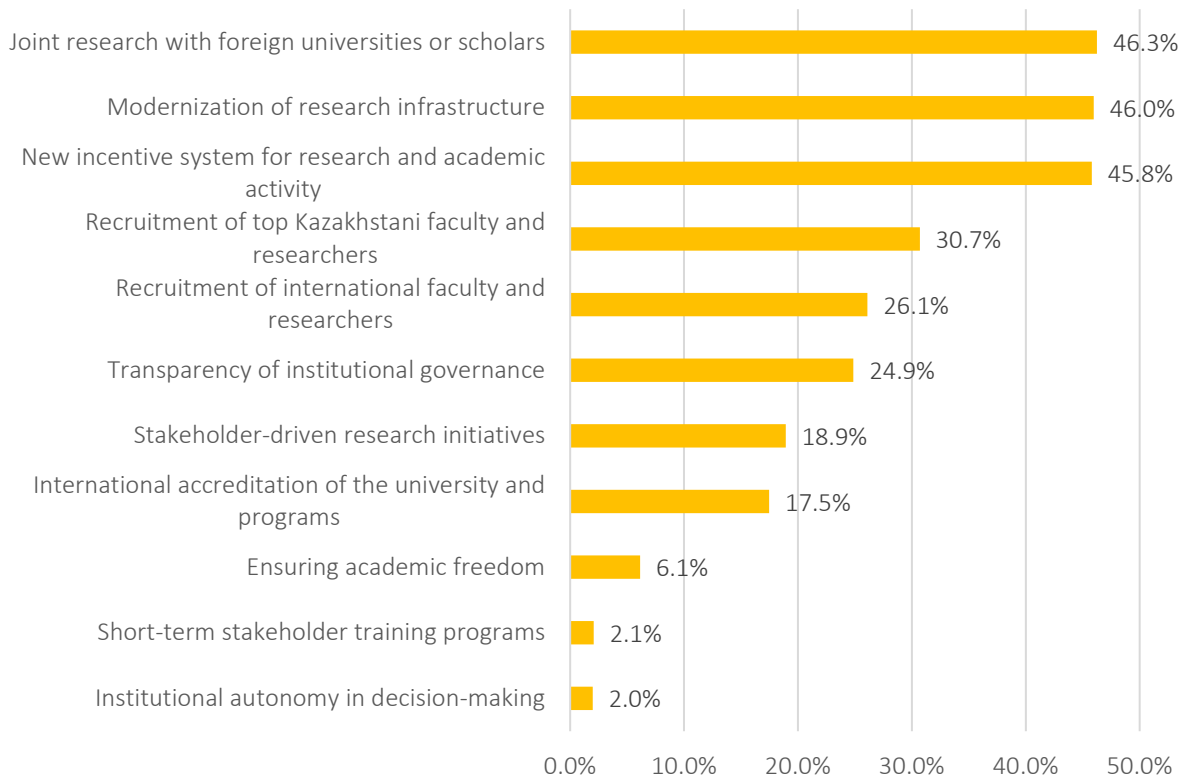
Additionally, item-level independent samples *t*-tests with Welch’s correction were performed to validate the robustness of the group-level differences. The majority of individual indicators showed statistically significant differences between faculty members (FM) and administrative staff (ADM) at the  $p < 0.05$  level. Notably, out of 32 tested items, four did not reach statistical significance: the number of faculty members ( $p = 0.246$ ), university academic reputation and stakeholder recognition ( $p = 0.701$ ), graduate employability and employer satisfaction ( $p = 0.106$ ), and the number of enrolled students ( $p = 0.588$ ). Three items had trends toward significance ( $p < 0.10$ ): students’ academic performance ( $p = 0.057$ ), the number of doctoral students ( $p = 0.094$ ), and the geographical location of the university ( $p = 0.091$ ).

These patterns reveal a degree of perceptual consensus between the groups on certain foundational aspects of academic excellence and institutional challenges, while reinforcing the consistency of the observed differences across most indicators.

To explore institutional priorities perceived as most conducive to achieving academic excellence, both respondent groups were invited to answer a multiple-response question: “Which of the following could contribute to your university’s achievement of academic excellence?” While the core question remained the same, the response structure differed. Administrative staff were presented with a list of ten strategies and could select up to three. Faculty members, on the other hand, received a slightly different list of eleven strategies and were allowed to select up to five options.

Due to these structural differences, in both the number of selectable responses and the content of the response options, two separate bar charts are presented below (Figure 6 and Figure 7), providing a comparative overview of the most frequently selected strategies in each group.

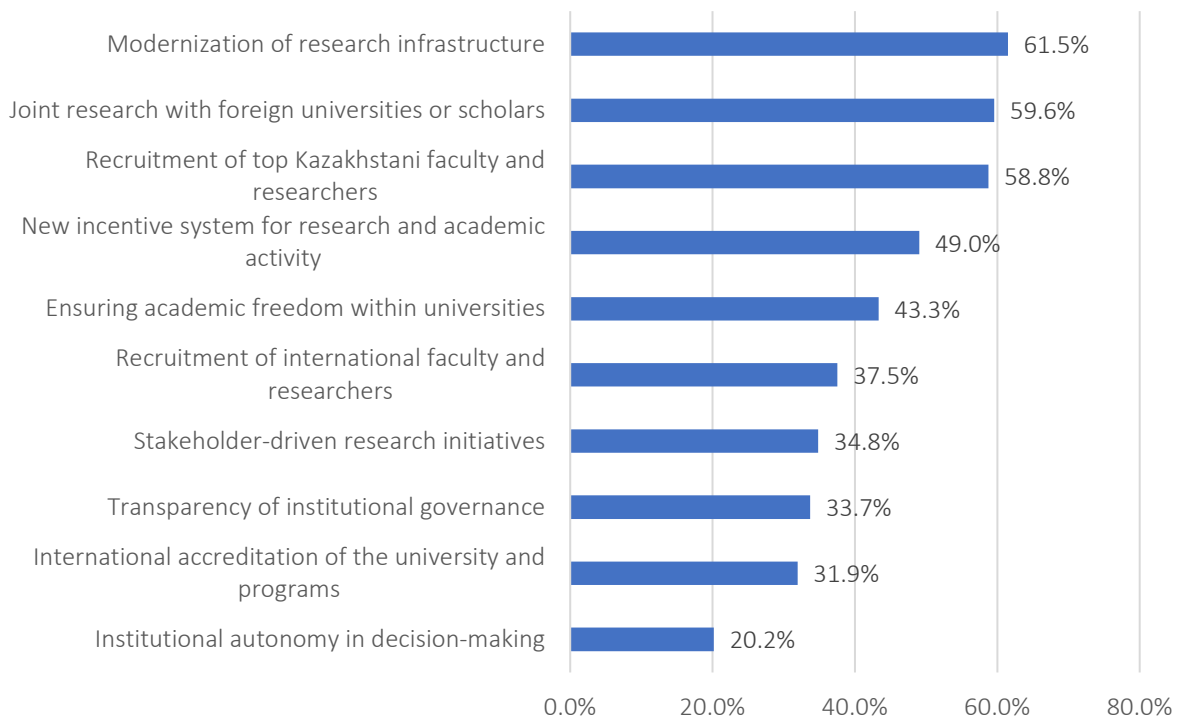
Faculty members most frequently chose the following: “Joint research with foreign universities or scholars” (46.3%), “Modernization of research infrastructure” (46.0%), and “New incentive system for research and academic activity” (45.8%). Also relatively common were “Recruitment of top Kazakhstani faculty and researchers” (30.7%) and “Recruitment of international faculty and researchers” (26.1%). By contrast, options such as “Institutional autonomy in decision-making” (2.0%) and “Short-term stakeholder training pro-



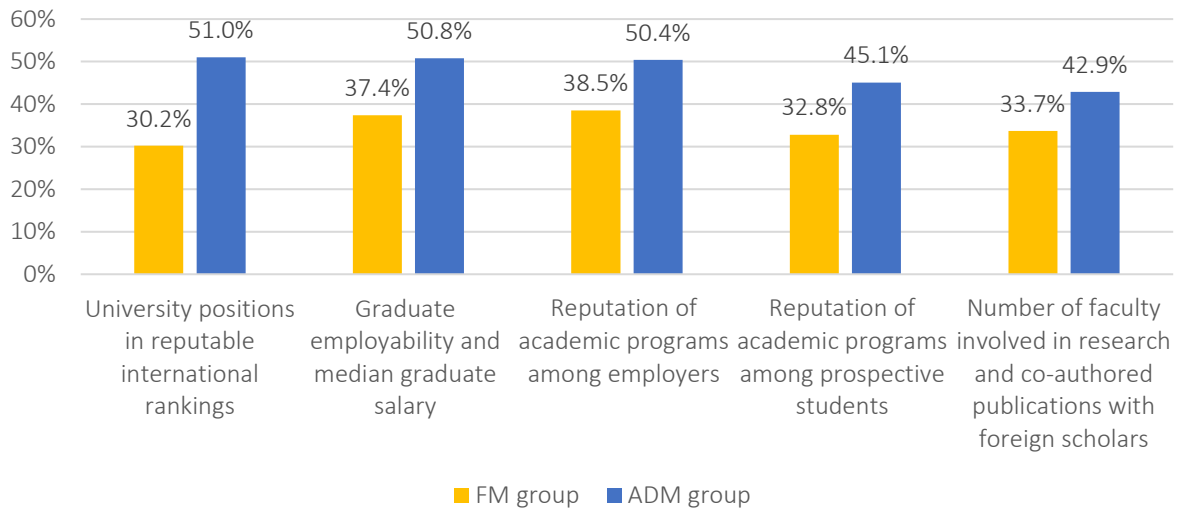
**Figure 6.** Institutional priorities selected by faculty members (up to five choices permitted)

grams” (2.1%) were rarely selected, indicating a clear prioritization of research capacity-building and academic collaboration over governance-related measures.

Respondents in the ADM group most frequently selected the following priorities: “Modernization of research infrastructure” (61.5%), “Joint research with foreign universities or scholars” (59.6%), and



**Figure 7.** Institutional priorities selected by administrative staff (up to three choices permitted)



**Figure 8.** Top 5 target indicators for assessing the success of academic excellence initiatives

“Recruitment of top Kazakhstani faculty and researchers” (58.8%). These were followed by “New incentive system for research and academic activity” (49.0%) and “Ensuring academic freedom within universities” (43.3%). These results point to the fact that administrative staff tend to associate academic excellence with systemic institutional advancement and global visibility.

In the final question, respondents were presented with a multiple-response question: “Which target indicators are the most appropriate to assess the success of academic excellence initiatives at the project or institutional level?” Participants could select multiple items from a predefined list of 19 performance indicators.

Interestingly, both faculty members and administrative staff identified the same five indicators as most important, although their rankings and selection intensities varied across groups (Figure 8).

The full list of 19 performance indicators, along with selection frequencies by group, is provided in Appendix C.

## 4. DISCUSSION

Academic excellence in Kazakhstani universities is shaped by both external pressures, such as government policy and rankings, and the distinct perspectives of faculty and administrators, which generate shared understandings as well as systematic differences.

Within this context, faculty and administrators share a broad, multidimensional view of excellence that goes beyond teaching quality and includes research, leadership, collaboration, and institutional growth. At the same time, administrators consistently expressed stronger alignment with these narratives, while faculty responses were more moderate. This pattern likely reflects their distinct roles: administrators are engaged in strategy, benchmarking, and compliance with policy frameworks, whereas faculty emphasize disciplinary quality and teaching standards. These differences align with international evidence that administrators and academics pursue complementary but not identical priorities (Facchini & Fia, 2021; Casa Nova et al., 2018).

Faculty and administrators interpret the building blocks of excellence, which consist of institutional characteristics, enablers, and barriers, through different operational lenses. For example, the ADM group rated 14 criteria out of 15 in institutional characteristics higher than FM, reflecting their more strategic and expansive view. Despite this, both groups showed broad agreement on key criteria that reflect institutional performance – faculty numbers, academic reputation and stakeholder recognition, graduate employability, employer satisfaction, student academic performance, and doctoral student numbers. Also, all the suggested lists of enabling components were considered important, with academic integrity, infrastructure quality, faculty academic freedom, and student involvement in research rated the highest by both groups.

Meanwhile, administrators viewed barriers such as limited autonomy, ministerial control, underdeveloped infrastructure, and uneven faculty qualifications as more severe, reflecting their closer engagement with regulatory oversight and institutional accountability. Faculty, by contrast, rated these constraints as less significant, suggesting that they may perceive such challenges as less immediate. An additional observation is that the ADM group also pointed to limited faculty involvement in governance, which suggests recognition of the need to include academic voices more fully in decision-making processes. As O'Connor et al. (2019) note, Kazakhstan's higher education system remains shaped by hierarchical, top-down governance, where formal guarantees of autonomy often fail to translate into genuine participation.

The analysis of strategic priorities reveals that both groups emphasized strengthening research capacity as the primary pathway to academic excellence. However, administrators leaned toward systemic reforms such as infrastructure and academic free-

dom, while faculty highlighted collaboration and incentives. This divergence highlights how stakeholder roles influence strategic preferences, even when there is agreement on core performance indicators such as rankings, employability, and international research engagement.

These findings suggest that, in the Kazakhstani context, faculty and administrative staff operate under the same formal governance structures; however, their lived experiences and responsibilities shape their focus on different dimensions of academic excellence. Practically, institutional leaders should avoid one-size-fits-all strategies and "us against them" mentality. Instead, fostering alignment between stakeholder groups requires honest dialogue, co-creation of metrics, and decision-making processes that truly reflect both academic and administrative voices. As universities strive to achieve academic excellence, the soft architecture of trust, inclusion, and mutual understanding may prove just as critical as physical infrastructure or global rankings.

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## CONCLUSION

This study examined how academic excellence is perceived and influenced by two key stakeholder groups in Kazakhstani universities: faculty members and administrative staff. By bringing these two groups into focus, the study reveals not only what they value and prioritize but also where misalignments may shape institutional realities. These insights matter because any effort to improve quality or pursue international competitiveness must start with a shared understanding on the ground.

Overall, the results demonstrate broad agreement on what academic excellence means, but also reveal clear differences in how each group perceives priorities, enablers, and barriers. These gaps may reflect different roles, responsibilities, and levels of exposure to institutional pressures. However, such differences can significantly affect how reforms are accepted and implemented. For Kazakhstani universities navigating both global pressures and local constraints, fostering open internal dialogue and building a more aligned institutional vision is not only beneficial but also essential for making academic excellence initiatives meaningful and sustainable. Further studies should include additional stakeholders, such as students and policymakers, to capture the broader excellence ecosystem. Longitudinal and comparative designs would help trace how perceptions evolve over time and why some institutions succeed while others struggle to meet excellence goals.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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## APPENDIX A

**Table A1.** Descriptive statistics of aggregated scales by group

Scale	Group	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Criteria	FM	7.44	2.45	-1.07	0.29
	ADM	7.92	2.05	-1.17	1.02
Components	FM	8.05	2.27	-1.51	1.57
	ADM	8.71	1.68	-1.78	3.43
Barriers	FM	5.58	2.44	-0.19	-0.83
	ADM	6.43	2.06	-0.35	-0.29

## APPENDIX B

**Table B1.** Tests of between-subjects effects (SPSS output)

Dependent variable: Mean

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	54.919 <sup>a</sup>	5	10.984	56.217	.000	.829
Intercept	3135.652	1	3135.652	16048.595	.000	.996
Block	6.479	1	6.479	33.159	.000	.364
Group	48.390	2	24.195	123.833	.000	.810
Block * Group	.325	2	.162	.831	.441	.028
Error	11.332	58	.195			
Total	3686.508	64				
Corrected Total	66.252	63				

Note: R<sup>2</sup> = .829 (Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .814).

## APPENDIX C

**Table C1.** Target indicators for assessing academic excellence initiatives (with group-wise selection rates)

Target indicators	FM		ADM	
	Count	Column N %	Count	Column N %
Reputation of academic programs among prospective students	273	32.8%	70	45.1%
Reputation of academic programs among employers	320	38.5%	78	50.4%
University positions in reputable international rankings	251	30.2%	79	51.0%
Number of faculty involved in research and co-authored publications with foreign scholars	280	33.7%	67	42.9%
Number of faculty holding degrees from leading foreign universities	141	17.0%	35	22.5%
Share of international students in the total student body	88	10.6%	36	23.3%
Share of foreign faculty among total academic staff	126	15.2%	45	29.0%
Number of joint and dual-degree programs with leading international universities	168	20.2%	58	37.5%
Share of academic programs accredited by internationally recognized agencies	176	21.2%	50	32.2%
Organization of international academic events by the university	224	27.0%	41	26.3%
University participation in international consortia and associations	156	18.7%	45	28.9%
Graduate employability and median graduate salary	312	37.4%	79	50.8%
Share of research projects conducted jointly with regional enterprises to address technological challenges	244	29.3%	61	38.9%
Citation rate of scientific publications	155	18.7%	38	24.6%
Number of patents obtained through research projects	153	18.4%	22	14.0%
Number of scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals	227	27.3%	58	37.6%
Number of university journals indexed in international databases	170	20.4%	41	26.2%
Share of total institutional budget derived from research and commercialization activities	142	17.1%	53	34.0%
Share of innovative products in gross regional product	117	14.1%	30	19.1%
Difficult to answer	5	0.6%	1	0.4%