

BEYOND SYMBOLIC COMPLIANCE: QUALITY AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

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Abstract

The concepts of quality and organizational strategy have been widely addressed in the public sector literature, yet empirical evidence in higher education remains scarce. This study explores the alignment between strategic plans articulating goals and quality assurance systems regulating the processes in the organizations. Undertaking a qualitative research design, it draws on 24 documents, including internal self-evaluation reports, external accreditation reports, and strategic plans, produced by eight Turkish public universities that have received either full or conditional institutional accreditation. The findings present that references to quality and strategy appear concurrently across all institutional documents, although they are considerably more salient in internal self-evaluation reports than in other reports and strategic plans. Universities with full accreditation demonstrate a higher degree of consistency among quality, planning and strategy mechanisms, frequently reinforced by the application of the accreditation process. Four higher education institutions holding conditional accreditation, however, show partial or developing consistency but do not display a fully functioning mechanism that links the relevant components. Moreover, fully accredited universities tend to rank more highly in international rankings, highlighting a potential link between the degree of quality assurance and overall institutional reputation. The research finds that, ultimately, the existence of the process management adopted by universities encompassing quality and strategy can be a critical factor in achieving full accreditation and better international reputation.

Keywords: *Quality, Strategy, Accreditation, Public Sector.*

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SEMBOLİK UYUMUN ÖTESİNDE: KAMU SEKTÖRÜNDE KALİTE VE STRATEJİK YÖNETİM UYGULAMALARI

Öz

Örgütsel kalite ve strateji kavramları kamu sektörü literatüründe kapsamlı biçimde ele alınmış olmakla birlikte, yükseköğretim alanında ampirik kanıtlar sınırlı kalmaktadır. Bu çalışma, hedefleri ortaya koyan stratejik planlar ve kurumsal süreçleri düzenleyen kalite güvence sistemleri arasındaki uyumu incelemektedir. Nitel bir araştırma tasarımına dayanan çalışma, tam ya da koşullu kurumsal akreditasyon almış sekiz Türk devlet üniversitesi tarafından üretilmiş olan iç değerlendirme raporları, dış akreditasyon raporları ve stratejik planlar dahil olmak üzere 24 belgeye dayanmaktadır. Bulgular, kalite ve stratejiye yapılan atıfların tüm kurumsal belgelerde yer aldığını, ancak bu atıfların stratejik planlar ve diğer raporlara kıyasla iç değerlendirme raporlarında çok daha belirgin olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Tam akreditasyona sahip üniversiteler, bu kalite süreçlerini daha destekler yapıda mekanizmalar kurduğundan, kalite ve planlama arasında daha yüksek bir tutarlılık sergilemektedir. Buna karşılık, koşullu akreditasyona sahip dört yükseköğretim kurumu kısmi veya gelişmekte olan bir bağlantı göstermekte, ancak bu bileşenleri bir araya getiren tam anlamıyla fonksiyonel bir çerçeve sunmamaktadır. Ayrıca, tam akreditasyona sahip üniversiteler uluslararası sıralamalarda daha üst basamaklarda yer alma eğilimindedir; bu da kalite güvencesi düzeyi ile kurumsal tanınırlık arasında potansiyel bir ilişki olduğuna işaret etmektedir. Araştırma nihayetinde, kalite ve stratejiyi kapsayan süreç yönetimlerinin üniversiteler tarafından benimsenmesinin tam akreditasyona ulaşmada ve daha iyi bir kurumsal tanınırlık elde etmede kritik bir faktör olabileceğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kalite, Strateji, Akreditasyon, Kamu Sektörü.

Introduction

Over the past five decades, both the theoretical landscape and the applied practices of public administration have undergone a profound transformation. This transformation has been shaped by the widespread adoption of modern managerial techniques such as innovation management, strategic management, total quality management and knowledge management. These tools have increasingly been deployed across public institutions with varying degrees of scale and success, leading to a growing body of institutional best practices. Public managers, seeking to construct efficient and adaptive organizational architectures, have attempted to contextualize these models in accordance with institutional conditions and policy environments.

However, a recurring critique in the literature highlights the fragmented and siloed implementation of these managerial instruments. When applied in isolation, such tools fail to generate the synergetic benefits originally envisioned. The lack of inter-instrument coordination often leads to duplication, policy drift or symbolic compliance, thereby diminishing the transformative potential of these public management reforms.

This ongoing evolution has coincided with the rise of core governance principles such as efficiency, effectiveness, and equity. These normative expectations have reconfigured the operational logics of public institutions, embedding managerialism as both a performative requirement and a legitimacy strategy. In the Turkish context, the past two decades have witnessed the gradual institutionalization of these practices, supported by legislative reforms, central guidelines, and quality assurance mechanisms. It is now possible to assume the existence of a sufficiently mature policy environment and institutional learning base to systematically evaluate how much these managerial tools have improved in public sector settings.

Grounded in this assumption, the present study critically interrogates the degree to which institutional alignment has been achieved among various instruments, particularly strategic planning and quality assurance in the Turkish higher education system. The analytical focus is on whether these tools function in a mutually reinforcing way, rather than as disconnected administrative procedures. The research selects eight Turkish public universities that have received institutional accreditation by the Higher Education Quality Council of Türkiye, under the premise that such institutions are more likely to operationalize a more coordinated approach.

Employing a qualitative methodology, the study utilizes documentary analysis to assess the institutional embeddedness of strategic and quality frameworks. It asks two interrelated research questions: (1) Do quality- and strategy-related practices differ across public universities with higher levels of institutional recognition? and (2) Is there a meaningful difference in strategy-quality practices between institutions that have received full versus conditional accreditation?

The paper is structured as follows: The next section presents a conceptual framework that situates strategic planning and quality assurance within a strategic governance paradigm. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the research design, data collection, and analytical methods. Empirically, the study analyses each university's internal evaluation report to reconstruct its institutional quality assurance architecture. These are then triangulated with external evaluation reports prepared by YÖKAK to examine reporting consistency and discursive convergence. Strategic plans from selected institutions are also analysed to assess whether quality indicators are embedded into long-term organizational objectives. Finally, the article offers a synthesis of the findings and discusses implications for policy and institutional reform. The study specifically examines the extent to which higher education institutions have achieved coherence among documents and plans that are prepared separately by institutional actors but are expected to function in alignment with the expectations of central regulatory bodies. Given that the strategic planning framework in Türkiye has been in place since 2006 and has continued up to the present day, while the institutional

accreditation process only began in 2019, this research engages with a highly current policy domain and draws on a relatively novel empirical foundation.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the rise of reform paradigms in the 1980s, a variety of managerial instruments have gained widespread prominence across public sectors globally (Hood, 1991, pp. 5-7). The resulting shift emphasized the usage of diverse administrative tools under coherent governance frameworks. Among these, strategic management emerged as a meta-approach that allows for the simultaneous application of various techniques such as strategic planning and total quality management (tqm) (Poister et al., 2010, p. 524; Reddick & Demir, 2024, p. 310). By encompassing these instruments, strategic management provides a comprehensive structure to demonstrate institutional maturity and organizational learning (Cameron & Quinn, 2011, pp. 35-39).

Nonetheless, despite its system-wide potential, empirical studies reveal that in practice, many public organizations tend to operationalize these tools in siloed and compartmentalized ways (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2007, p. 1062). TQM efforts, for example, are frequently limited to process evaluation and incremental improvement, and are seldom articulated with strategic plans. This structural fragmentation undermines the transformative potential of new public management reforms. Several studies have thus emphasized the need to design institutional goals and quality assurance systems that are mutually reinforcing (Durant, 2002; Dodd, 2004, pp. 13-25; Asbari et al., 2025).

Bryson (2018) argues that strategic management in public administration should not be reduced to formal planning mechanisms; rather, it should serve as a connective logic that aligns planning, implementation, evaluation, and feedback processes. Similarly, Öztürk & Genç-Tetik (2021) emphasizes the critical function of performance management in closing the strategic planning loop by linking strategic intent to measurable outcomes. In this cyclical model, plans provide essential input for organizational memory, enabling adaptive learning and the formulation of improved strategies in subsequent planning cycles.

However, public sector institutions often experience implementation bottlenecks (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Hill & Hupe, 2009), where strategic plans and quality frameworks fail to deliver anticipated results. As Cossani et al. (2022) observe, one of the principal causes of this gap is the bureaucratization of quality assurance processes, particularly institutional accreditation. Although accreditation is designed to assess alignment with predefined quality standards through external peer review, it is often perceived as a symbolic exercise or compliance ritual, rather than as a substantive strategy for institutional enhancement. In many cases, quality processes become disconnected from practical results, thereby reducing their relevance (Harvey & Williams, 2010, pp. 5-24).

Research on the intersection of quality assurance, strategic goals and accreditation is abundant in the healthcare setting where causal relationships

are more easily traceable (e.g., Miller et al., 2005; Braithwaite, 2010; Jaafari-pooyan et al., 2011; Willson et al., 2017, Alhawajreh et al., 2025). However, such studies remain relatively limited in the public administration and higher education literature (Westerheijden et al., 2007). Nevertheless, it is increasingly recognized that integrating quality with organizational strategy could produce not only more meaningful evaluations but also a shift toward evidence-informed governance.

In particular, the adoption of a well-functioning quality management framework requires institutional cultures that emphasize long-term planning, and participatory decision-making (Suleman & Gul, 2015; Klasik & Hutt, 2018). When quality assurance mechanisms are perceived as intrinsic to routines, rather than as externally imposed mandates, they can foster organizational fit and continuous improvement.

Lastly, the mutual reinforcement between strategic planning and quality assurance is gaining traction in public institutions seeking to enhance institutional capacity and improve service delivery (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Wouter et al., 2010). While strategic planning provides a long-term vision, quality management operationalizes this vision through process orientation, stakeholder participation, and incremental improvement mechanisms (Deming, 1986; Kickert, 1997). Both approaches converge around the principles of evidence-based policy making and goal-oriented management (Moynihan, 2008; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). In higher education, these dynamics are particularly visible in the context of accreditation, which has become a normative expectation for both private and public universities seeking to align their strategic priorities with institutional legitimacy (Collins, 2015, p. 141; Andreani et al., 2020, p. 699).

Connecting institutional goals with quality principles is expected not only to enhance the implementability of strategic plans but also to enable continuous improvement (Radnor & McGuire, 2004). Achieving this can significantly develop the effectiveness of managerial choices, ensuring that principles such as value for money acquire tangible expression in the public sector context (Gudissa et al., 2024, pp. 2-15).

Strategic management in public institutions entails more than setting goals and determining direction; it also involves quality assurance processes within a comprehensive governance architecture. Within this framework, strategic planning provides guidance for goal-setting and achievement and institutional quality management contributes to the continuous improvement of implementation processes while fostering a learning organizational culture (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Ferlie & Ongaro, 2015).

However, the public administration literature consistently underscores the structural decoupling of these systems. Rather than functioning as components of a shared strategy, strategic planning, and quality assurance are frequently operationalized as standalone or symbolic practices. As Moynihan (2008) and Pollitt & Bouckaert (2011) suggest, quality mechanisms are often

formalized in appearance but lack substantive impact on governance capacity, while strategic plans frequently fail to function as meaningful instruments for institutional steering.

To overcome this fragmentation, it is essential that strategic planning and quality assurance be implemented not as isolated systems but as mutually informing processes that communicate with one another and activate the full spectrum of institutional resources and capabilities. Such process management holds the potential to enhance the collective capacity of these governance instruments.

2. NATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The Turkish higher education system is composed of 208 universities, 129 of which are public institutions, as regulated under Law No. 2547. These universities are formally established as autonomous legal entities. However, their autonomy is substantially constrained by centralized planning mandates, hierarchical control mechanisms and legal-administrative dependencies on national authorities. In other words, the organizational structures and mandates of public universities are explicitly defined by statutory frameworks (Fındıklı, 2022). Although multiple reforms have sought to promote decentralization, the strong bureaucratic traditions of the Turkish public administration system continue to shape institutional discretion, including within universities that are formally designated as autonomous (Kesik & Canpolat, 2014).

A major shift toward strategy-based governance was triggered in the early 2000s with the enactment of the Public Financial Management and Control Law (Republic of Türkiye, 2003). This legislation institutionalized strategic management principles across public bodies, requiring the preparation of five-year strategic plans and corresponding annual performance programs. These instruments are further monitored through annually published reports, creating a policy cycle rooted in transparency and fiscal responsibility.

In line with this model, universities are expected to develop strategic goals in three core domains: Education, research and governance. Central coordination is provided by several high-level authorities, chief among them the Presidency's Strategy and Budget Office (SBB). The SBB reviews and approves strategic plans and financial proposals submitted by public universities. In doing so, it acts as a central node in shaping how strategic governance is operationalized within the higher education sector.

Parallel to the rise of the new management system, quality assurance has gained traction in public universities over the past decade. While program-level accreditation has existed for some time, institutional quality assurance remains a relatively novel endeavour. Since 2017, the Higher Education Quality Council of Turkey (YÖKAK) has operated as the primary agency

responsible for evaluating institutional alignment with national quality standards. Established through an amendment (Article 35) to Law No. 2547, YÖKAK conducts external evaluations across all institutional domains (Yükseköğretim Kalite Kurulu, 2017).

As 2019, the Institutional Accreditation Program (KAP) has been the main mechanism through which universities undergo external quality review. Based on predefined criteria outlined in the Institutional Evaluation Guide (Yükseköğretim Kalite Kurulu, 2025), universities may receive full accreditation (valid for five years), conditional accreditation (valid for two years), or a rejection with recommendations for future resubmission. The most critical data sources in this process are the Internal Evaluation Report (KİDR), which universities must prepare and submit prior to site visits, and the Institutional Accreditation Report (KAR), which is produced by external reviewers following their evaluations (Yükseköğretim Kalite Kurulu, n.d.).

Ultimately, the strategic planning and quality assurance systems implemented in Turkish higher education serve overlapping purposes. Each seeks to assess and improve institutional activities across education, research and governance. This study aims to examine how such practices are reflected in the strategy- and quality-related documents of accredited universities, contributing to ongoing debates regarding policy coherence and systemic coordination in higher education governance.

3. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing documentary analysis as its method. Given that the research focuses on written materials and seeks to explore both their individual and collective meanings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 19-26), a qualitative approach is considered appropriate for the objectives of the study. The data consist of secondary sources, and the analytical process involves both textual and numerical content analysis.

Secondary data may be derived from technical reports published by specific institutions, sectoral publications, statistical datasets issued by government bodies, or publicly available digital materials (Patton, 2015). In this context, the study draws attention to the diverse range of reports published in Türkiye on quality assurance and institutional governance, including those by the Higher Education Quality Council of Türkiye (YÖKAK) and various strategic documents issued by universities. While not all are analysed in detail, their variety underscores the breadth of the policy framework.

It is important to note that the mere reproduction of data from official reports does not qualify as secondary data analysis. Rather, the originality of this study lies in its synthesis and interpretation of information obtained from various sources to generate new insights (Eisner, 1991; Labuschagne, 2003, pp. 101-102). Within this framework, the study prioritizes institutional

accreditation feedback reports and internal self-evaluation reports, which are among the most comprehensive and objective documents in Turkish higher education. Additionally, strategic plans, which contain the most explicit measures of institutional priorities, are included to triangulate the analysis.

The study enables both intra- and inter-institutional comparisons by examining how these documents are structured and how they reflect the interconnection of management components. The empirical scope of the study includes the period between 2019 and 2025 and focuses on public universities that participated in the Institutional Accreditation Program (KAP) administered by YÖKAK and received either full or conditional accreditation.

The research design of this study was structured within a deductive qualitative content analysis framework, whereby the institutional documents of eight universities were compiled for secondary data analysis. The coding framework developed for the analysis of strategic plans, institutional self-evaluation reports (KİDR), and institutional accreditation reports (KAR) aimed to assess the extent to which these documents reflected the practices of strategic management. Accordingly, rather than generating emergent codes during the analysis process, the study employed a set of predefined codes to systematically examine the documents.

The predefined coding categories included Leadership, Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms, Mission, Vision and Policies, Strategic Objectives and Goals, Performance Management and Participation of Internal and External Stakeholders. These categories were not inductively derived from the data; instead, they were determined prior to the analysis based on the conceptual and regulatory framework. In other words, a systematic research design was adopted to determine the extent to which these specific themes were reflected across different institutions and document types. Furthermore, since the inclusion criteria for the documents were established at the outset of the study, data saturation was inherently achieved once all documents in the dataset had been coded.

The sampling strategy is purposive, aimed at evaluating the coordination of strategic planning with quality assurance processes in Turkish public universities. The sample was drawn from Turkish institutions listed in the 2025 Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, focusing on universities within the 0–1000 and 1001–1200 global bands (Times Higher Education, n.d.). The use of THE rankings also allows the study to examine the extent to which accreditation results in higher education align with universities' reputation in international ranking systems. Out of eleven Turkish universities represented in these bands, eight were selected to ensure a balanced comparison between different accreditation outcomes. Specifically, the final sample includes four fully accredited and four conditionally accredited universities, with equal representation from both ranking categories. One fully accredited university was excluded to preserve

comparative symmetry, and two others were excluded due to their non-participation in the accreditation process.

Table 1. Accreditation And The Ranking Status Of Universities

University	Accreditation Type	Accreditation Year	Presence in THE Rankings (2025)
University F1	Full Accreditation	2023	Ranked (801–1000 band)
University F2	Full Accreditation	2021	Ranked (501–600 band)
University F3	Full Accreditation	2023	Ranked (351–400 band)
University F4	Full Accreditation	2022	Ranked (801–1000 band)
University C1	Conditional Accreditation	2021	Ranked (1001–1200 band)
University C2	Conditional Accreditation	2024	Ranked (1001–1200 band)
University C3	Conditional Accreditation	2025	Ranked (1001–1200 band)
University C4	Conditional Accreditation	2022	Ranked (1001–1200 band)

Accordingly, the final analysis is based on eight public universities whose 24 documents including internal self-evaluation reports, strategic plans and institutional accreditation reports were examined using qualitative content analysis. This sample enables a comparative assessment of how accreditation status correlates with the level of implementation of organizational management tools. Moreover, the reports uploaded to MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, were examined both individually and comparatively to evaluate the findings.

To preserve anonymity and maintain research ethics, the names of the universities were not disclosed. Instead, institutions that received full accreditation were labelled with the letter “F”, while those with conditional accreditation were labelled with the letter “C”. Each university was then randomly assigned a number, and all analyses were conducted using pseudonyms such as F1, F2, C1, C2, C3, etc.

The analysis was conducted in four stages. In the first stage, content analysis was applied to determine the extent to which themes relating to strategy and quality management were embedded in institutional documents. The second and third stages reviewed the “Leadership, Governance, and Quality” sections of internal self-evaluation reports from eight accredited universities, focusing on the interconnectedness of strategic planning and quality assurance. In the final stage, the study moved beyond the dichotomy of full versus conditional accreditation to examine how institutions that emphasize strategic management in their documentation address the relationship between strategy and quality terms within their strategic plans. This cumulative approach provided a comprehensive basis for assessing structural compatibility.

The coding system was constructed by using the main headings within the reports as reference points. Specifically, six sub-themes were extracted from the “Leadership, Governance, and Quality” section: (1) leadership, (2) internal quality assurance mechanisms, (3) mission, vision, and policies, (4) strategic objectives and goals, (5) performance management and (6) stakeholder participation (both internal and external). These six categories served as the initial analytical framework. Additional emergent codes identified in the same section were also incorporated into the scheme. To complement the qualitative analysis, a word-frequency analysis was conducted, alongside the examination of quantitative indicators such as numerical references and rubric-based scores.

4. FINDINGS

In the initial analysis, particular attention was paid to the extent to which concepts related to quality assurance such as accreditation, continuous improvement and quality management were highlighted in planning documents, and to what degree strategy and strategic management concepts were emphasized in external reports. Eight strategic plans, eight internal self-evaluation reports, and eight institutional accreditation reports were examined and subjected to word-frequency analysis.

The results revealed that all documents included references to strategic management; however, these emphases were more pronounced in the internal self-evaluation reports compared to the other types of documents, even though the number of strategy- and quality-related words was lower. While a tendency in favour of conditionally accredited universities was observed in terms of word usage, the overlap in vocabulary across both fully and conditionally accredited universities meant that the differences were not substantively meaningful (Appendix).

Since all reports included the relevant terminology, the second stage of the analysis continued with the full set of eight universities and 24 documents. At this stage, the scores reported in the internal self-evaluation (KIDR) and institutional accreditation (KAP) reports were analysed both separately and in aggregate. Scores assigned to the six sub-categories were first averaged for each university and subsequently averaged across all institutions. Comparisons were then made between the self-assigned KIDR scores and the scores assigned by external accreditation teams. The rubric ranged from 1 (no activity) to 5 (an internalized and exemplary system), with intermediate levels representing planning (2), implementation (3), and monitoring and improvement (4).

As rubric-based KIDR–KAR scores possess a structured ordinal character, the values presented in the study were analysed descriptively, with the aim of illustrating institutional differences and the patterns arising from these differences. Therefore, the scores were not treated as a psychometric measurement tool.

The results in Table 2 indicated that institutions overwhelmingly rated themselves at the higher end (4–5), whereas external evaluation reports concentrated more within the 3–4 range. Among the six categories, stakeholder participation consistently received the lowest scores, while internal quality assurance mechanisms were evaluated as the strongest dimension by both institutions and external evaluators. Furthermore, the average score discrepancy between internal and external evaluations was smaller for fully accredited universities (0.37) than for conditionally accredited ones (0.63). However, in four cases (two full and two conditional), the averages from both types of reports were identical, indicating that discrepancies arose primarily from a subset of institutions. Notably, one fully accredited university (F3) showed complete consistency across self- and external evaluations in every sub-category, suggesting a high level of objectivity. Conversely, one conditionally accredited university (C2) exhibited the largest discrepancy (1.3 points), highlighting subjectivity in self-assessment.

Table 2. Comparison of Quality Assurance Indicators Across Universities (KIDR vs. KAR)

	Leadership		Internal quality assurance mechanisms		Mission, vision and policies		Strategic objectives and goals		Performance management		Participation of internal and external stakeholders	
	KIDR	KAR	KIDR	KAR	KIDR	KAR	KIDR	KAR	KIDR	KAR	KIDR	KAR
University F4	4	4	5	4	4	3	3	3	4	4	4	4
University F2	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3
University F1	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	3	4	3
University F3	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4
University C1	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3
University C3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	3
University C4	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	4
University C2	4	3	4	3	5	3	5	4	4	3	5	3

Table 3. Inter-Rater Reliability Results by University

University	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha	Inter-rater Agreement Level
University F4	0.33	0.45	Moderate agreement
University F2	0.00	-0.09	No agreement
University F1	-0.07	-0.20	Weak disagreement
University F3	1.00	1.00	Perfect agreement
University C1	0.00	-0.09	No agreement
University C3	0.00	-0.20	Weak agreement
University C4	0.00	-0.50	Moderate to strong disagreement
University C2	-0.09	-0.57	Strong disagreement

The inter-rater reliability analysis between the institutions' self-produced reports and the accreditation reports prepared by external evaluators in Table 3 revealed predominantly low or negative levels of agreement, with Cohen's Kappa ranging from -0.09 to 0.33 and Krippendorff's Alpha ranging from -0.57 to 0.45 (except for F3, which achieved 1.00). These results are meaningful in light of the way the data were generated. The divergent values indicate that institutions tend to assign higher scores to their own practices and approach the evaluation process subjectively.

As Meyer and Rowan (1977) and Suchman (1995) emphasize, organizations often seek to maintain legitimacy and shape institutional perceptions by portraying their achievements in a more favourable way than reality would suggest. In this regard, universities may also, consciously or unconsciously, present a form of symbolic compliance in their self-assessment processes, thereby assigning themselves higher scores than warranted. While such tendencies are not always easily detectable from the outside, they become more evident in contexts where external evaluations, such as accreditation reviews, provide an independent benchmark, making optimism bias more visible.

The four-stage analysis demonstrated that the eight universities under study employed varying degrees of alignment across strategic planning and quality assurance. While all institutions were subject to regulatory requirements mandating both strategic planning and participation in quality assurance processes, the extent to which these elements were genuinely coordinated varied considerably. Internal and external evaluation reports proved to be the richest sources of evidence for integrated approaches, while strategic plans generally reflected less explicit emphasis. These findings highlight the significance of examining accreditation outcomes alongside management practices, particularly when assessing high-performing universities in international rankings.

In the third stage, the analysis moved beyond numerical scores to a closer examination of institutional documents through qualitative coding. The internal self-evaluation and accreditation reports were reviewed to determine whether a whole of management approach was evident. Comparisons between fully and conditionally accredited universities revealed that the former were more likely to articulate and operationalize strategic management models. Fully accredited universities frequently documented systems such as quality assurance systems, mechanisms, and regulations linking strategic planning with quality assurance. Nevertheless, conditionally accredited institutions also included some references to this link, particularly through the presence of quality offices designed to track institutional processes. The results suggested that while quality-strategy alignment was more explicitly developed in fully accredited universities, conditionally accredited ones were also taking steps in this direction.

The final stage focused on the universities' strategic plans. Besides general coding, specific searches were conducted for key terms such as quality, quality assurance, accreditation, monitoring, improvement, continuous improvement, stakeholder, participation. The findings indicated that although universities did not explicitly label their approach as strategic management, they nevertheless demonstrated awareness and application of related practices. Interestingly, no clear distinction was observed between fully and conditionally accredited universities in terms of the frequency of quality-related terminology. In fact, in some cases (C2, C4), conditionally accredited institutions referenced such concepts more often. However, closer inspection revealed that these references lacked the systemic coherence found in the reports of fully accredited institutions.

Across all strategic plans, goals related to quality were present, typically framed around enhancing institutional quality, establishing quality assurance systems and obtaining program-level accreditations. Only one fully accredited university (F3) explicitly included the establishment and operation of a strategy-quality management system. The concept of improvement was widely used, though continuous improvement, linked explicitly to quality, was clearly articulated in only two universities (F2 and C4). Overall, references to coordination between the tools were far more prevalent in the self-evaluation and accreditation reports than in the strategic plans. Nonetheless, quality assurance, accreditation and continuous improvement remained central priorities across all institutions.

Conclusion

The creation of system wide and goal-oriented organizational structures in the public sector depends on channelling institutional capacities in a purposeful manner (Fumasoli & Hladchenko, 2023). Although Turkish higher education is framed by legal and regulatory obligations that require

strategic planning and participation in quality assurance, there is no overarching model prescribing exactly how these elements are expected to be brought together. Universities, shaped by distinct missions and environmental contexts, are expected to leverage their resources through self-defined methods and decision-making processes.

This study investigated the extent to which two core domains—quality/accreditation and strategic planning converge in practice. The findings indicate that fully accredited universities consistently maintain systems that link quality and planning in different ways. In three institutions (F1, F2, F4), quality management systems provided the primary axis for enhancing strategic goals, while in one institution (F3) these dimensions were fully embedded into a well-defined strategy-quality system. Fully accredited institutions also demonstrated a reliance on monitoring strategies and quality processes.

Conditionally accredited universities also showed evidence of quality assurance initiatives and efforts to link different management domains; however, none presented a fully consolidated model capable of addressing both dimensions simultaneously. While one institution claimed to apply a strategic management model, its documentation lacked sufficient detail regarding how quality processes were connected to strategic planning arrangements. Taken together, these findings suggest that the existence of a more consolidated management structure may constitute a key distinguishing factor in attaining full institutional accreditation.

Moreover, this study examined universities that not only hold institutional accreditation but also occupy strong positions in international rankings, exploring whether institutions considered high quality under both national and international evaluation criteria exhibit a more consolidated management structure. While accreditation status alone does not ensure effective coordination between strategy and quality-related practices, full accreditation appears to be associated with a more coherent institutional arrangement. The findings indicate that all four fully accredited universities were listed in the Times Higher Education rankings (within the 351–1000 band), pointing to a notable association between ranking and an institution's capacity to sustain comprehensive management arrangements. This correspondence highlights the significance of strategic management not only for accreditation outcomes but also for broader indicators of institutional standing and reputation. Overall, the results suggest that elements of organizational coherence tend to reinforce one another, implying the presence of a mutually supportive relationship between these dimensions.

By demonstrating a connection between strategic management and institutional reputation, this study reinforces the argument that management approaches should be addressed as interdependent rather than isolated domains. Within the Turkish higher education context, it is therefore

recommended that the Council of Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency, together with other overarching bodies linked to universities, actively promote the establishment of different management tools. In order to ensure that universities establish genuinely consolidated management structures rather than falling into cycles of symbolic compliance, regulatory bodies can adopt specific measures to promote the development of effective mechanisms as there is a tendency among certain universities to limit their efforts to satisfying the standards imposed by these bodies. The widespread adoption of such an approach would not only strengthen institutional effectiveness and support the continuous improvement processes required by accreditation but also enhance the prospects of attaining international standards of excellence.

Finally, while this study relied on a delimited set of sources, strategic plans, self-evaluation reports, and accreditation reports, it highlights the potential for broader research using additional documents such as indicator reports, feedback reports, monitoring and activity reports. Expanding the sample of universities and incorporating academic perspectives on the perceived value of integration would also strengthen future research. Such studies could further test whether adopting strategic and quality management models contributes to the creation of higher education institutions that are publicly valuable.

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Appendix

Table 4. Comparative Frequency of Strategy and Quality Related Terms Across Institutional Reports

