

## PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYABILITY, SKILLS AND INDIVIDUAL ASPIRATION IN A DIVERSIFYING ECONOMY

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Employability is a relatively new concept. The notion that post school educational institutions should play some role in preparing young people for employment really only came into focus as participation increased and the curriculum offerings diversified. As higher education moved from being the domain of the few- the elite – to being a mass or near universal destination for all who had ability and aspiration greater attention was paid to the employment of graduates.

And employability is a variable, changeable concept. For some employability means the graduate's readiness for a specific trade, profession or vocation. Others stress the importance of preparing young people for life time employability which includes the capacity to continue to learn and adapt. This broader conception is important because it acknowledges that the nature of most forms of work changes over time and that the occupational structure of economies change as technology increases the productivity of individuals. It also important because it gives individuals a degree of individual freedom – it gives them a skill set that is portable and transferrable. It allows them to choose to change jobs, change employers, change sectors and even change location. This is particularly important in diversifying economies and where small and medium enterprises are widening the range of economic activity offering entrepreneurial opportunities

Our focus in this panel session is on the different perceptions of the notion of employability and the skills that young people have when they leave higher education. What matters to educators, employers, policy makers and by individuals seeking work? Are there fundamental disconnects between these different views that limit the effectiveness of our educational programmes and constrain the economic and social development of the nation?

This session explored these differences in perception. Our lead speaker Alper Akdeniz from PriceWaterhouseCoopers brought an international perspective to the question of employability with direct lived experience in four different regions of the world with very different labor markets. He also brought the perspective of a leader of a multinational enterprise and employer that has supported large scale mergers of global enterprises. And he carried the insights of a trained accountant – one of the increasingly global professions.

Alper Akdeniz identified a set of mega trends that are external to nation states and to institutions. Yet these trends shape the work of institutions and the direction of the social and economic development of nations. These trends also shape the opportunities for young graduates changing the demand for certain skills and capabilities as technology changes notions of productivity and leads to changes in work processes. These changes are reflected in the opinions and judgements of Chief Executives who are regularly surveyed by Price Waterhouse Coopers.

His introductory address reminded us that horizon scanning, looking for the mega trends and the discontinuities and opportunities in a changing environment, is one of the important roles performed by Rectors and Boards of Trustees of colleges and universities. They have the responsibility to look for market signals that show that demand for certain skills is either increasing or decreasing with consequent changes in the value.

Our three panelists brought different perspectives. First we had the perspective of a national policy maker Kanysh Tuleushin, Managing Director of Joint-stock Company National Management Holding Baiterek. Kanysh Tuleushin's current responsibilities include leading the Holding's financial and investment support of non-oil and gas sector, ensuring sustainable development and diversification of national economy, attracting investment, and improving corporate management systems at its subsidiaries. Baiterek holdings has made significant investments in small and medium businesses and supported and guaranteed loans to over 3600 private entrepreneurs. These and

other activities have helped to create about 85,000 jobs. The Holdings encourage entrepreneurship, self-employment and for people to become employers to attract and use skills that they do not have themselves. This focus on the individual and his or her capacity to be an employer, a creator of jobs, or to be a sole practitioner is in contrast to the passive, supplicant role that is sometimes associated with notions of 'employability'.

Against this background it was not surprising that Mr. Tuleushin reminded us that as non-extractive industries are emerging quite quickly in Kazakhstan and that these small and medium enterprises are an important part of the future of the nation. The growth of this sector is accelerated by entrepreneurial activities, an area of particular interest to Baiterek Holdings

Our second panelist is Rector of Karaganda State Technical University (KSTU), Arstan Gazaliyev, leader of an educational institution, an observer and interpreter of those market signals. KSTU is a very strong technical university focused on engineering, technology, mining and architecture but it also has a commitment to foreign languages through its Confucius Institute. It has close ties to industry and offers students experiential learning through its many science and research laboratories. These close links help it manage one of the potential mismatches- the different rates of innovation and the adoption of technological change in industry and in universities. By design educational institutions are conservative entities committed to preserving knowledge and associated skills and values and transmitting them across generations. They tend to lag behind enterprises which are looking for greater productivity and are quick to adopt new processes. Yet employers also often demand that graduates have a solid grounding in the traditions and fundamentals of a discipline or occupation. Students come to KSTU to prepare for specific fields and aspire to jobs in particular sectors. But they come with the knowledge that technology is changing rapidly and re-shaping the current work place and rearranging the occupational structure of the local and regional economies. They know better than us that their future will be very different to our past and that they need to be prepared to change jobs or change the ways they work. This need impacts on the type and scope of educational experiences they seek and need to prepare for productive lives.

So there is a potential mismatch between what industry expects of KSTU and what its students expect. The Rector illustrated how formerly distinct skills like expertise in engineering and fluency in the Chinese language were now seen as complementary. Great value is placed on new combinations of skills and individuals with these broader skill sets are in great demand. He also noted as did other panelists and forum participants that these combinations of skills and the value ascribed to them will change over time as supply changes, as technology changes and as aspirations change.

Our third panelist Aida Sagintayeva can offer us some very different perspectives on the question of the existence and nature of a mismatch between employability and skills. Her lenses on this issue included the school or department level as a leader at Nazarbayev University's Graduate School of Education which has a mission of preparing leaders of schools, colleges and universities. How to best prepare them for institutions where governance structures are changing as boards of trustees are being established, new academic standards are being introduced and extensive professional development programmes are being taken up by large numbers of teachers? She also drew on her experience in guiding the Bolashak programme, a national initiative that was created to deal with pressing and strategically significant skill mismatches in the years immediately after independence. One of the many policy conundrums in national scholarship programmes is balancing individual choice and preference, the student determining what skill to acquire with the immediate and pressing employment needs of the national economy or of particular strategic industries or sectors. This yet another perspective on the complex interaction between skill formation and the employability demands of workplaces, industries and the national economy. Dr Sagintayeva's most powerful point was that an individual's employability was as much about values, their personal and professional integrity, their trustworthiness, as it was

about skills and competencies. This resonated with many participants and was a theme touched on in subsequent sessions.

Our fourth panelist was Stavros Yiannouka, Chief Executive of the World Innovation Summit of Education (WISE) based in Qatar. He drew on his experience at WISE and his long involvement with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore to remind that higher education professionals were often unduly critical of their institutions. There is he argued much to be positive about including the contribution higher education makes to the employability of graduates and the more diffuse but strategic role the sector makes through the creation of new knowledge.

There was lively discussion following the panel presentations covering the issues of motivation of young people, the importance of young entrepreneurs and the speed with which occupational structures and the nature of jobs were changing.

To summarize: we have a rich symposium. We began with a global and multinational perspective; we followed it with a national perspective; then an institutional view; and then finally the perspectives on two experts, one looking at the issues of an individual's value or character and one looking across the sector globally.

Concluding observations emphasized the importance of transferable and adaptable skills. Skills of this kind give individuals more choice; they allow them to change employers, change locations, industries and occupations more readily. They act as a safety net, a stock of human capital that can be applied to a variety of productive endeavors.

Lists of these skills abound. Jamil Salmi and Alper Akdeniz offered exemplars in the forum. They were broadly similar but they tended to be couched in static language – problem solving, critical thinking – rather than actively. The emphasis might be better placed on action, on the application of skills. Solving problems, working in teams, resolving conflict, acting with integrity are expressions point to the behavior of the individual. Demonstrating, displaying and using skills and competence is of more importance than holding or possessing a capability or a body of knowledge.

This is a more pertinent and more useful way to look at notions of employability.