

PREFACE

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These conference proceedings represent voices of academia, students, employers and labour market on perspectives and issues of graduates' employability. As the academic world tries to grasp its ways of drawing closer ties of education systems with the real-world labour market, youth unemployment and underemployment has become common across the world especially at times of economic crisis. With 14% of OECD average of youth unemployment (August 2015) and Kazakhstan's youth unemployment rate of 4.2 % (July, 2015), we are observing more and more debates stressing education policies geared to the labour market and the importance of active labour market policies on both national and international levels.

The scene is set in the introductory and welcoming speech of the Minister of Education and Science, Dr. Aslan Sarinzhapov who provides his view on current developments of the youth employability locally and internationally. He emphasises the importance of education in the success of government reforms and nation-building in general such as the case of Kazakhstan and other former Soviet republics located in Central Asia and Eurasia. Minister Sarinzhapov notes that work and education are still generally perceived as two worlds apart. He points out challenges of building partnerships between academic institutions and the labour market and calls employers for a more constructive engagement and involvement in the development of educational programmes as one of the priorities in the national policy for higher education in Kazakhstan. Also, the Minister makes a point on the design and development of approaches and instruments for assessing new young workers' skills that should be shared commonly by education providers and employers. Indeed, to tackle the issue of youth employability, it is essential to design 'a whole-of-government strategy' for more coherent policy settings (OECD Skills Outlook 2015, 21).

The issue of partnership between education providers and employers has been discussed at Session 3 "University-Employer-Community Relationships". Matthew Hartley reminds us of a mutually beneficial relationship between the university and the employer. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha raises a point on the role of professional associations in building productive relationships between academic institutions and employers. Abdrakhman Naizabekov, in his turn, taking a case of an institution based in one of Kazakhstan' industrial town Rudny, gives us a good example of partnership between a mining company and the academic institution detailing possible ways real-world employers and practitioners could play their part at higher education institutions' academic programmes.

Employers want to hire qualified and strong specialists, as explained by Hugh Lauder (a keynote speech). They want people who are ready – graduates – people coming out of education systems who are ready to play and who are ready to work. The graduates' dilemma of meeting the employer's expectations and acquiring well-integrated work experience is one of the institutional and personal challenges that students experience as they aspire to become qualified employees. Though Professor Lauder refers to the social contexts of US and UK, the situation of having overqualified graduates doing non-graduate work is relevant to other regions of the world. For instance, in the context of Russia and the post-socialist bloc of countries, Isak Froumin raises a point that universities should not try to produce planned numbers of engineers and other specialists until they understand exactly what the labor market needs in terms of qualifications and competences.

Clearly, enabling students to achieve success in their studies and find one's calling in life should be closely intertwined with their future career aspirations. As Tim Miller, in his keynote speech, notes, careers are planned, they do not just happen. As mentioned by Yerezhap Mambetkazyev (Overview Session), there has been a concern that academic systems, apart from drawing on standardized testing, need to develop a new rational model of competent diagnostics of graduates' academic progress. Taking a stance of employer, Alper Akdeniz (a keynote speech) poses a question to the audience of "what should be considered in developing educational programmes that are fit today for tomorrow's

challenges” and presents five main mega-trends that are expected to shape the future landscape of graduate employability.

Many authors have underscored the importance of curriculum and its impact on graduate employability. Curriculum reform is one of the main challenges that academic institutions have to take into account to make their education services relevant to graduate employability. David Bridges (Session 5 “Student Transitions and Careers Guidance”) notes that good curriculum planning requires attention to four key principles of curriculum design: continuity, progression, differentiation and coherence. Seeram Ramakrishna (Session 1 “Global Skills”) provides a comprehensive view on upgrading undergraduate and graduate education from the perspective of the net generation that is characterized by the students’ preferences for blended learning, digital technology and access to worldwide comparison of universities at the programme level.

Jamilya Nurmanbetova (Session 1 – Global Skills) calls academic institutions to incorporate ‘real work’ practices in the curriculum while Arstan Gazaliyev and Yuri Pak (Session 2 “Perceptions of Employability, Skills and Individual Aspiration in a Diversifying Economy”) point out the importance of keeping a reasonable balance between theory and practice in higher education curriculum. Over-theorized educational content and lack of opportunity for students to engage with the real-world learning situations have been a major challenge in academic institutions. An issue closely related to the theory-and-practice point is the idea of labor market relevance and dual programmes that combine work and study. In Session 4 “Role of TVET in Career Development”, a timely point of increasing convergence of systems of technical and vocational education and training and the higher education sector has been raised by Sabirzhan Madeyev, Geoff Hayward and Rainer Goertz. In this context, Geoff Hayward discusses challenges of transitioning that students experience as they move from VET to Higher Education and elaborates that access to higher education remains crucial for making progress to higher paid jobs.

Rainer Goertz presents a case of how the TVET system in Germany has taken a more active role in the education an employer markets coming from a ‘supplier’ to a ‘developer’ agent for qualifications and key competences. This is very relevant to Kazakhstan where the employment rate of VET graduates comprise 36.5% as a percentage of employed population that is considered to lag behind the rate of OECD countries. Nevertheless, less than 50% of VET students and less than 40% of students in general programmes are exposed to work-based learning on average across OECD countries (OECD Skills Outlook 2015, 34).

Jamil Salmi (Session 1 “Global Skills”) makes a point that today’s graduates need more than just academic skills and refers to the 21st century skills that are supposed to help prospective graduates be internationally competitive. We must admit that not many higher education institutions manage to embed transversal skills as teamwork, collaboration and communication in their higher learning curriculum. Closely related issue is the importance of developing social and personal values that would underpin graduates’ job role and the organization they would work at in the future. This point is raised by Aida Sagintayeva who sees understanding one’s values as an essential element of one’s professional identity. Seeing a meaning in what one does may help a prospective graduate feel fulfilled and satisfied with one’s job and career in general.

The notion of choice to navigate one’s own career success has been extensively discussed at the Forum. Loretta O’Donnell (Session 3 “University-Employer-Community Relationships”) makes a strong point that given accelerating forces of technology, economic and social changes, the traditional concept of ‘career ladder’ has been replaced by a ‘career landscape’ that presents different directions and thus requires an ability to make a rational choice of one’s own career path.

References

OECD (2015), OECD Skills Outlook 2015: Youth, Skills and Employability, OECD Publishing, Paris. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264234178-en>