

GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Introduction

Dear ladies and gentlemen! Dear friends, dear guests!

I would like to welcome you once again in Astana at Nazarbayev University at this important event and a good tradition of annual meetings of national and international experts in the field of education – *the fourth Eurasian Higher Education Leaders' Forum*. It is becoming a good platform to discuss all the recent developments in the higher education system. More and more countries and participants come here. So, this year the Forum takes place at a very important moment. As you know, Kazakhstan has recently held presidential elections. The President announced a very serious reform plan on five institutional reforms where education takes a key role. Now the government is very busy putting together Action Plan for the next five years to develop our education system. I think that the discussions at this Forum will contribute to this work and we will all be witnessing creation of a new five-year reform package that would hopefully move Kazakhstan towards top thirty most developed countries including the development in the human capital sector.

At this year's Forum, I invite you to place the primary focus of our discussion on the most pressing issue of the higher education system – employability. The theme of the Forum is *“Graduate Employability in the 21st Century”*.

One of the major issues facing governments of the countries is successful crisis negotiations, employment crisis. In OECD countries, every fourth citizen aged between 16 and 29 is unemployed, they do not study in the system of education and do not do any professional training in the industry. The problems associated with the various sectors of the economy exist worldwide. A special emphasis in facing these challenges is given to education.

Education and its Role in the State Building

The education system plays a key role in the new plan of five institutional reforms of Kazakhstan, “100 Concrete Steps to Further State Building” in all the five areas of the reforms. This requires from us particular actions on improvement of all the sectors of education. This great responsibility is difficult to overestimate, since the key link of the forthcoming reforms is nothing more than human capital.

As the experience of leading countries and international development has proven, education and science should be a key factor of national development, growth in competitiveness, economic growth and social harmony. Therefore, we believe that all educational and scientific communities of the country and, of course, our Ministry needs to have a new attitude to the ideology based on the approaches and values of education and science as public goods.

These changes, which take place in the field of education today, are designed to have a positive impact on the situation in the future and should contribute significantly to the development of collaboration and partnership between academic institutions and industry. The discrepancy between the employers' expectations and the results of training specialists is a global challenge. This problem relates to both local actors and speakers from other countries. For instance, in 2013 the UK Commission for Employment and Skills surveyed about 100-thousand of the employers for the issues they face while searching for employees. The results of the recruitment procedure according to figures from the employers show that almost 3 out of 4 positions lack relevant

professionals. The reason for this is insufficiency of skilled personnel. In total, approximately twenty two percent of all jobs are just the same.

The last year's survey among Kazakh employers aimed to identify their expectations from university graduates and revealed the following. Highlighting the importance of academic achievement, the prestige of the university, graduates' commitment to updating their skills and knowledge continuously, employers showed concern about the quality of qualifications acquired at university.

What do these facts tell?

It is clear that companies cannot get around hiring recent graduates, despite the fact that the employer is not always sure that yesterday's graduates have acquired relevant education and training. Understanding this, the employer should be convinced to work more closely with academic institutions. The interaction of an academic institution and the industry has not reached the matching level of expectations at both ends. In the context of Kazakhstan, this issue is compounded by the fact that in general, despite the transition to market economy more than 20 years ago, the supply and demand both in the labor market and in the education market is still evolving. A considerable work has been done in the development of the national business. New production units emerge, new technologies are implemented, and new job positions are introduced. The labor market is developing quite rapidly. However, higher education system does not stand still. New academic programmes emerge, professional development level of teachers increases, Kazakhstani universities become more involved in international processes and initiatives. Nevertheless, there are disputes regarding what kind of an employee a graduate should be, and sometimes graduates do not meet the requirements that employers provide. Thus, until now, despite the joint efforts for the development of the labor market and the education market, this dialogue with the production encounters certain difficulties. I would like to mention that today there is a tendency to understand that although the school provides the basic knowledge and skills, further development of students' competences in their chosen major is not just a problem of the education system. The debate concerning the benefits of the interaction between industry and the university has been steadily expanding. The emphasis is laid on training on particular examples of industry, the formation of precisely those skills that are in demand by the employer.

Role of Industry Representatives and Employers in the Development of Relevant Industry Specific Qualifications Frameworks and Professional Standards

The key form of integrating industry representatives in the training of specialists is their participation in the development of the National Qualifications Framework. National Qualifications Framework is oriented to employers. Since 2012, our country has been making serious efforts for its implementation. The Labour Code introduced a special chapter, which approves National Qualifications Framework, industry specific qualifications frameworks have been developed. The subject of this Forum is dedicated to the issues of core competencies of graduates and the modern labor market. Furthermore, there are many examples in the history when educational system would take the lead in solving global problems and, one such an example is signing the Bologna Declaration by the ministers of education in the 1999. The document aimed at uniting the efforts of the ministries of education for unification of higher education systems in their countries in order to create a single labor market which would act to single documents on education and graduates would acquire almost the same level of knowledge and skills.

The engaged participation of the employers in the development of relevant industry specific qualifications frameworks and professional standards is crucial. Practical involvement of employers in the development of educational programmes is needed. Responsibility for the development

of the united approaches and tools for assessing the quality of graduates' training should be shared commonly by the representatives of both education and the labor market.

Practical collaboration with the labor market in the training of the graduate promises a lot of progress. However, even in this progressive process we should not forget the important role of high school - providing basic knowledge. This fundamental knowledge is the basis of the "lifelong" learning process.

Modern technologies are developing rapidly, and in some industries quite rapidly. No university can provide skills that would be in demand for once and forever. Therefore, appreciating the role of industry in the learning process, we should not forget that the system of fundamental knowledge acquired in the university is critical for self-regulated learning, mastering skills independently and the ability to invent new ideas in the production technology. The main challenge for the education system in our rapidly changing world is the necessity to form the ability and motivation to learn independently and lifelong professional development.

Coming back to the key theme of this gathering, I would like to emphasize that industry provision with qualified specialists as well as efficient investment fully depends on the quality forecast in personnel needs in the long-term perspective. However, even the existence of a clear forecast does not guarantee to meet the needs of the labor market. The state recently introduced the relevant regulations regarding the need for the graduates of pedagogical and medical specialties that received state academic grants to work at least for three years. The issue on the introduction of such a requirement for all the students that got a place at university due to the state grant has been raised. This measure to some extent may contribute to the consolidation of young professionals in their field.

Recent changes that have been introduced in the education system include the establishment of the institute of corporate governance, consolidation of the efforts of all stakeholders through the establishment of supervisory boards, boards of trustees, the policy of integration of academia and research, integration of education with industry to train qualified staff able to meet the requirements of the rapidly changing market. We are standing on the threshold of major reforms that I am sure will lead our country to the most developed countries of the world, including the development of human capital, in accordance with the tasks set by the Head of the State. I think that our Forum, our discussion will also contribute to this case. In this regard, I would like to wish all participants of the Forum fruitful work, interesting discussions and positive outcomes!