

IN SEARCH OF CRITERIA AND FACTORS OF SUCCESS FOR A REGIONAL UNIVERSITY

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President Nursultan Nazarbayev defined success of universities as follows (2012): "(...) it is, first of all, those universities that have the status of autonomy, academic freedom and focus on research activities." At present, the only autonomous university in Kazakhstan is Nazarbayev University. National universities have a certain degree of academic freedom. Regional universities also have specific features that are remote from the centre of decision-making, limited in human resources and facilities, etc. In this regard, let us try to answer the following questions: what are some criteria for determining the success of a university in a region, and what factors determine the success of a regional university?

Criteria for success for a university are very diverse. It may be criteria for evaluating research and educational activities, student leisure, the ratio of teachers and students, number of academic degrees obtained by faculty, etc. Those can also be global and/or domestic rankings criteria offered by the rankings agencies.

The society has been permanently forming various kinds of needs that require trained professionals. The need for specialists in various fields is constantly evolving and changing, which imposes additional requirements to the higher education system. Therefore, in this system, as in any other, there is the "input" that claims on the environment, and where the system must respond. Bearers of these requirements are students and their parents. At the output of the education system, graduates enter the labor market, i.e. universities graduate already more or less trained specialists through which the society generates the existing knowledge and builds the capacity required for further development of the society.

I believe, in relation to the education system, it is necessary to continuously monitor and analyze information about the output of university graduates in the labor market. In any system, including educational one, information analysis coming at the "output" stage of the system, resulting in its return to the "input", allows to adjust the stability of the system. However, the educational system is very inertial; it is very difficult to disrupt it. It is also difficult to restore it. Therefore, it is very important to choose the right strategy, since the feedback that restores balance and stability in the system of higher education cannot occur earlier than four or six years, which is the period for graduates entering the higher education system and going out of it right to the labor market (Nurmagambetov, 2002).

It is proposed to measure the success of a university as an element of market relations. In this regard, let us address the method of Parsons open systems analysis and represent the university as an open system (1997). At the entrance, we have the flow of applicants, and we have graduates going to the labor market at the output.

The stability or success of this system is determined by a feedback loop, which is the main mechanism for regulating the university's activities and satisfying the needs of the region labor force. Thus, the integral indicator of the success for a regional university is employability, which is the main criterion. It should be noted that this criterion is difficult to apply for national universities - their graduates are not localized in one region.

Let me now address some institutional success factors. For this, we use Jamil Salmi's (2009) approach who determines the success of world-class universities on the basis of the following factors: "a high concentration of talent (of faculty and students), an abundance of resources to create favorable conditions for learning and advancing research, and effective management structure at an institution that promotes a strategic vision, innovation and flexibility" The question arising is how this formula is applicable for the success of a regional university?

The question of high concentration of talented faculty in a region is very limited. As for talented students, the selection is carried out on the basis of the results of Unified National Testing¹, and the testing system is not within the competence and control of the university. Much has been said about the involvement of private investors, or the establishment of an endowment fund. However, these mechanisms are not developed in our country yet.

Those activities performed by the collegial governance body represented by Boards of Trustees or Supervisory Boards have not proved to be effective yet. But does this mean that a regional university cannot be successful? What factors influence the success of a regional university? What is the way out of this situation? I think it is necessary to pay attention to the following factors:

- increasing of public funding in the development of regional universities from the national budget is of primary importance;
- engaging local government leaders and employers in the management of a regional university is essential;
- reaching a new level of public-private partnerships (PPP) in higher education is a must. I consider it necessary to provide a solid legislative framework in terms of tax incentives for patrons of education, as well as other forms of moral encouragement without which the PPP in education cannot be widespread;
- providing a clear understanding of the university's development strategy by all the stakeholders including faculty and students is essential. Innovation and continuous improvement require creation of a particular culture with stakeholders involved in this process;
- developing an institutional strategy for internationalization of higher education is important. Attracting international professors and students can improve the academic level of students and enrich their experience through intercultural communication;
- designing English-medium academic programmes will allow to develop a more effective collaboration with international professors and scholars and take advantage of their expertise;
- limiting the range of academic programmes for a regional institution focusing only on those specialties that are demanded in the given region. Expanding specialties and thus the student contingent in the pursuit of increasing financial resources greatly affects the quality of education and yet results in falling reputation of the university in the region;
- creating an educational cluster of universities in the region, eliminating duplication of specialties. This will avoid unnecessary competition, parallel training and unprofitable small groups. As a result, each institution can be successful in its field.

To sum up, we see that the success of a regional Kazakhstani university depends on many factors. These factors can be significantly enhanced and expanded. But the main factors seem to be found in support from the state; clear understanding of the university's strategy by the university team; the university's involvement in solving the problems of the region; and working closely with the internal and external stakeholders.

¹ A high-stakes assessment test in Kazakhstan which serves a dual function: a school-leaving exam and a test to enter higher education.

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