PRINCIPAL LEARNING POINTS

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During the Forum, we heard from many practitioners and experts from government, employers and universities across the world. Four themes emerged repeatedly, although they were often expressed from different viewpoints, and with different emphases:

1. Working in partnership: all participants recognised the need to work in partnership for mutual investment and benefit, and to benefit the society and economy in Kazakhstan and the CIS region. These stakeholders include current and prospective students and their families; the government; employers; university managers, teachers and administrators;

2. Questioning the role of universities in an evolving labour market: we heard about the speed of change in the labour market, driven by rapid technological change; increasing globalisation; and government policy and emerging industry sectors. This evolving labour market can be characterised as VUCA1 (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous), so "what is and should be the role of universities in student employment outcomes and employability in a VUCA world"?

3. Tension between stability and development: many speakers raised this; how do universities make sure their curricula are educationally robust and at the forefront of disciplinary knowledge, whilst also ensuring these curricula meet the needs and expectations of students and employers? We agreed that employer feedback to universities is absolutely vital to inform curriculum and programme innovation and revisions. The consensus from delegates was that universities should be employer-informed, rather than employer-led to maintain a healthy balance between intellectual independence and employer involvement;

4. Starting early: many speakers presented compelling evidence for careers guidance to begin in school to enable able pupils to aspire to university study and to make wise and informed choices about their study options. And once students are enrolled in university, they must start early with the acquisition of the skills, knowledge and experience, and development of the qualities and attributes that will enable them to move confidently and quickly into graduate-level employment after graduation. We also heard that students need support and guidance with making the transition into higher education from school; as they progress from year to year, and make wise choices about optional modules, work placements; and lastly, finishing their bachelors study and making the transition into the world of work or further study.

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1   www.forbes.com. An acronym originally coined by the US military to describe conditions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and now used to describe four challenges we face in our rapidly changing world.

More focus needed …

Five areas were either under-represented and/or absent from discussions:

1. Education as social good: education at all levels – in schools, TVET and in universities – enables learners to gain explicit skills, understanding and competence across a range of academic and vocational subjects. Whatever their level of educational attainment, students in any national educational system can also gain shared values and a common culture because they have all had these experiences. The Forum would have been strengthened by more emphasis on this meta-theme of education for social cohesion and the economic good;

2. Student experience and the student voice: until the last session on the last day, we had not heard from students about their experiences. When we did, these contributions were very powerful, energising the audience and reminding us why we are educators. Another year, we could represent the student voice more strongly, for example, start the Forum with their experiences to frame the two days; survey university students and recent graduates on their views; record some students on video talking about their experiences, including students from a range of universities, both in Astana and Almaty and the regions;

3. Graduate autonomy vs. training workers: Employability supports students to develop a range of knowledge, skills, behaviours, attributes and attitudes which will enable them to be successful not only in employment but in life. There was a strong sense from speakers that the role of university education was to train workers. Of course, I understand the immediate national need to provide graduates for a buoyant local labour market in which the Minister of Education and Science told us 22% of vacancies are not filled because suitably qualified and committed graduates cannot be found. However, this understandable but short-term focus on training will not enable these graduates to survive and thrive in the labour market during their long working life, when we as their educators are dead and gone. As an illustration, those graduating today in 2015, aged 22, will still be working in 2058, assuming they retire aged 65. We cannot predict what the world of work will be like by then, but one thing we can be sure of, it will not be as it is now. If we over-emphasise *training*, and under-emphasise *lifelong learning for life not just a job,* the risk is that they will lack the necessary autonomy. This would limit their ability to learn for themselves, to analyse their experiences and extract their learning and to have the confidence to push into new sectors and new jobs;

4. 'Graduateness': this is not a word you will find in a dictionary, so I should provide a definition. It is important as it is certainly what employers need, and what students hope for. 'Graduateness' describes the explicit and implicit skills, qualities and knowledge gained from university study that are of lifelong value. For example, academic study will mean graduates can research, analyse, synthesise, evaluate, make judgements, present – they are learning how to learn, and all these skills are immediately transferable to the workplace. Another example would be work experience, either paid or unpaid, part of their academic programme or not – this gives graduates insight and knowledge of the world of work, and help them make good decisions about the sector or company they might apply to for graduate work after graduation;

5. University as a transformative experience: there was a lost opportunity during the Forum to describe university as a transformative experience, rather than a transactional exchange. What do I mean by that? For many students, going to university will be a time of transition

and change: for example, it may be the first time they have lived away from home, or had to shop and cook for themselves. They may have been the cleverest student in their class, and now they are amongst a group of peers who are equally able. University offers the chance to be away from parents, to try new styles, new sports, and to meet different sorts of friends. I am describing a *transformative* experience during which the young person can mature into a young adult, and find out new things about themselves – this is a preparation for life. The *transactional* approach usually fails to provide this transition to adulthood, and at its worst, will make graduates work-ready or trained for only that first job, and unable to navigate the choppy waters of an uncertain and evolving labour market in the medium to long-term.

Employability in the 21st century

Shigeo asked me to present my own views in three key points:

1. An unknown future: Many of you will be familiar with the quotation: "we prepare graduates for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet".[2] And as discussed in the previous section, a VUCA world requires leaders to re-think and re-engineer their organisations[3]. Whatever our personal views of these predictions, we can be sure that today's skills and knowledge will not be sufficient for tomorrow's challenges – and this gives universities both a challenge and an opportunity;

2. Universities, challenge and opportunity: The responsibility for the building blocks of employability lies with the students themselves and with the whole university. The best practice is where everyone in the university works together on a common goal of enabling students to become self-directed and therefore successful scholars and employable graduates. The message is clear from employers, a degree is not enough to secure graduate-level employment[4]. This research demonstrated that employers are looking for '4+1', where the four are: (1) a good degree from a good university as a guarantee of quality; (2) work experience so students can acclimatise quickly to the world of work and become productive immediately; (3) full participation in life at university to demonstrate intangible but necessary qualities that employers want such as being flexible, adaptable, enthusiastic, proactive, able to challenge the status quo; (4) the ability to draw all these things together, "to tell their story" and demonstrate their fit with potential employers. And what is the 1? This is the ability to draw together all this learning and experience about the world of work and themselves into, for example, a good CV, a well written application form, a convincing covering letter, a successful interview. The challenge and opportunity for universities is three-way. Firstly, we need to collaborate with employers on their particular needs, with those who represent particular sectors to gain a sectoral view of impending changes, and with government to understand the societal context. Secondly, we must retain our proximity to and understanding of students. Thirdly, we must retain excellence in research and teaching;

3. Changes in student expectations: our experience at the University of Warwick is that student expectations of study and future work are changing. They want to learn differently; and they expect an experience that is personal, interactive and tailored[5]. They also have

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2   Karl Fisch and Scott McLeod, *Shift Happens*, video, 2011

3   Chris Hedges, *The Myth of Human Progress and the Collapse of Complex Societies*, October 2013, www.truth-dig.com

4   Outcomes from the employer strand of the HEFCE-funded King's Warwick project, 2009-2011

5   Conversations with Sabbatical Officers from the Students' Union at the University of Warwick, student focus groups, and individual students

different expectations of work. Research by the organisation, Workopolis6, has identified that current students see their future work as blended rather than as strongly delineated between work | home/other as many of us do. Their view of work is that the lines between work and play will become blurred; they may not seek the same satisfaction and challenge from work as we do, or define "satisfaction" and "challenge" differently. Part of this change is that in a world of 7 billion people of whom 5 billion have a mobile phone, access to enormous computing power is natural and a right rather than a choice or a phenomenon. They are used to processing multiple sources of information simultaneously, and working in a flexible, non-linear way. They expect their future work to be similar. So this may alter where they work, the hours they work, etc. Our students would characterise this as "taking their place in, and creating their world". How do universities meet these challenges of students wanting a different learning experience, and anticipating a very different perspective on work?

Challenges for Higher Education

1. Adapt or die: many speakers spoke about the need for universities to embrace change, quoting Charles Darwin: *"It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."* How do universities change and evolve, and who (if anyone) can act as our guides?

2. Demand and supply: universities supply graduates; employers supply jobs. If 22% of graduate jobs in Kazakhstan are not filled because employers perceive that suitably qualified and committed graduates are not available, what can both sides of this equation do to help each other? I suspect part of the problem is that graduates are not able to articulate their competency, motivation and potential fit/suitability to employers – are students supported to present themselves well? Are employers clear in job descriptions and adverts? How adept are universities and employers at working together, or is this in its infancy? Other speakers spoke of the difficulty in recruiting suitable graduates to the regions, is this a question for government, or universities and employers, or both?

3. Understand and act upon the web of stakeholder needs: higher education and TVET serve many societal needs, and have complex stakeholder demands. We need to understand these, hold them in balance, and not shy away from their complexity.

4. How to enable early engagement in higher education or TVET: our speakers were clear that schools and higher/further education should work together to ensure improved guidance on subject choices at schools, and choice of degree subject.

5. Innovating with new modes of learning: this covers three inter-linked areas: firstly, the "traditional" student who enters university at 18 or 19, and graduates 4 years later is probably not the model for the future; some may choose to study part-time, and work part-time; some may come to university some years after graduating from high school. Secondly, how future-proofed is our teaching? Is digital literacy embedded in our programmes of study; how much are we embracing the move away from low-level factual learning and focussing on critical thinking and problem-solving? And thirdly, how open are universities and TVET to employers asking them to co-design and co-deliver new modules to up-skill their employees for new types of job?

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6   Peter Harris, The 10 skills you will need for the jobs of 2020, 2014, article on www.workopolis.com

6. Changing student and employer expectations: "we must prepare students for their future, not our past"7 Universities have an opportunity to embrace change to address employability in the 21st century that connects all the relevant stakeholders, government; current and future students and their families; employers;

7. The implications of students both seeking and creating jobs: these was a lively debate about the rise in student entrepreneurs who will be creating jobs for themselves and others. Are universities ready to support them with enterprise and entrepreneurship skills and opportunities to learn and practise?

8. Defining your university's value (who you are, whom you serve): Shigeo was clear that it is perfectly acceptable to have a taxonomy of universities. That is, some will serve a local/regional labour market, some a national market, and others an international market for graduate talent. Equally, some will specialise in particular sectors, whilst others will have a comprehensive offer. Universities should be courageous enough to define themselves, the students they wish to attract, and the employers they want to work with.

9. The challenge of creating work-ready and future-proofed graduates who can take their place in the world: in many ways, this is the big challenge for higher education and TVET.

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7   Scott McLeod, Karl Fisch, 2011 ibid