

Nazarbayev University – a vector for modernization

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NUR-SULTAN. KAZINFORM – [Kazinform International News Agency](#) shares the article of Shigeo Katsu, President of Nazarbayev University, in which he looks back at the past of Nazarbayev University and what the future holds for NU as it approaches its 10th Birthday.

From idea to reality

When then President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Mr. Nursultan Nazarbayev announced in a speech to the nation in late 2006 that he asked his government to establish a world-class university, a university which would educate the future leaders of not only Kazakhstan, but also the surrounding region and beyond, he may have been the only one who could visualize the realization of his request some three and a half years later, and furthermore the rapid development of the new university that bears his name. In September 2010 a first cohort of some 490 bright-eyed eager students enrolled into Nazarbayev University (NU)'s Foundation Program at the Center for Preparatory Studies, at that time outsourced to one of NU's strategic partners, the University College of London. The following year, about 470 of them progressed to become the very first NU undergraduate students. This past fall NU has enrolled its ninth cohort, and the student body today is over 5,400 strong – a ten-fold increase, and counts about 3,400 undergraduates, almost 1,300 graduate students including 200 PhD students and over 700 foundation program students.

NU students and graduates have become synonymous with quality education and research both internationally and in Kazakhstan; they are very competitive internationally and are welcomed at the top universities of the world. Almost half of our first degree graduates aspire to continue their studies, their ambitions will continue to build the research infrastructure of the nation. Most of the other half enter the job market and are prized by employers who appreciate their ability to solve problems even in areas outside of their expertise, take initiative, work in teams, be creative and motivated, and their openness to adapt.

NU research is taking off, with citation impact (a commonly applied yardstick measuring how frequent NU research publications are cited by fellow scientists and authors) over the last five years already at 25 percent above global average – the next ranked Kazakhstani universities are regrettably still considerably lower than the global average. Almost a third of NU's research is published in the top 10 international peer-reviewed journals. Using these research metrics, NU is already comfortably ensconced in the top 10 CIS universities and the top 20 of Central and Eastern European universities. NU Medicine (medical school, hospitals and research laboratories) closely collaborates with top international partners and already serves as a model for other university-based medical systems in Kazakhstan.

NU Innovation is breaking new ground both by commercializing the work of our scientists and by facilitating and promoting technology-oriented start-up enterprises powered by our own students and graduates as well as by a diverse group of tenants at NU's Technopark. In the near future, innovation will further be accelerated by the building of NU's Astana Business Campus. All these breathtaking developments, supported by the modern buildings on campus and other physical infrastructure have led international higher education experts to include NU among the handful of «accelerated universities»*, a small group of new universities that have developed rapidly and are fast gaining a strong international reputation. In NU's case this reputation and the work of our students and faculty has earned our place among the founding members of an exclusive «Asian Universities Alliance» that currently brings together 15 top Asian universities from East Asia (China, Japan, South Korea), South East Asia (ASEAN countries) all the way to the Arabian Peninsula.

What made this fast development possible?

NU's extraordinary development is built on the endless hours of principled hard work and dedication from the NU Community and steadfast strong support from Kazakhstan's leadership. Ideal condition for NU to thrive were provided: an enabling legal framework that for the first time in the post-Soviet space conferred academic freedom and institutional autonomy to a university, and ample resources that allowed NU to attract talent – high quality international as well as national professors and scientists, the brightest students in the country, and talented administrators, and build modern facilities. And I pay tribute to all the colleagues of our NU community; I cannot thank them enough. I realize that we have been embarking on a marathon as if on a 100 m sprint. So my plea to my colleagues is to please stay the course; it will be worth the efforts.

The investments of time, leadership and resources brought with it big expectations. One was for NU to replace the successful Bolashak (Government sponsored overseas scholarships) program's undergraduate window, by providing world-class education and research opportunities locally in a safe environment so our students could develop as the nation developed. Ten years ago this shift may have seemed a big bet, not least because a lot of money is at stake. Some have claimed that investing in NU has been at the detriment of other deserving budget expenditures; yet, the cost per NU student is still considerably lower than the cost of funding a Bolashak grant. To date, NU has graduated more than three and a half thousand students from the first five cohorts. Next year when we will celebrate our tenth anniversary, NU students and alumni combined will cross the threshold of 10,000, constituting an emerging critical mass of future leaders and modernizers that will be counted upon to meet Elbasy's challenge to the nation of turning Kazakhstan into one of the 30 leading countries by the mid-century and become the world's problem-solvers. It seems fair to say that the bet has been paying off quite fast, and handsomely so.

I should mention a number of essential building blocks that have enabled NU's development. In addition to the legal framework and generous financial resources, NU leadership has from Day One been hardnosed about two principles: starting with the foundation programs, students enter NU on merit only – no other considerations apply; and strong commitment to academic integrity and excellence has served as a cornerstone for the creation of a research-oriented university. It may have taken a few years to get these two principles fully accepted by students and parents alike, but they are fully accepted today and are the reasons NU degrees have international credibility. Another benefit of the strict observance of these principles is that has ensured that NU students come from all regions, all types of schools and from families with very different levels of income, including some from remote and low income communities.

Teaching is combined with research from the beginning, and undergraduate students are quite conversant in research methodology and ethics, as they are in critical thinking, and indispensable element to scientific enquiry. From the beginning, it was agreed that English would serve as the language of instruction and research, acknowledging its role as the lingua franca of modern business as well as science.

Of course, NU students also learn Kazakh language, history and culture so they have a deeper understanding of the traditions and distinct contribution the nation has made to regional and global stability and to be able to contribute to Kazakhstan's development via public service. Strategic partnerships with leading international universities in order to accelerate NU's institutional development constituted another important building block. These partnerships are expected to evolve into partnership of equals.

And finally, we deliberated at length and agreed on a set of institutional values that then translated into our Graduate Attributes. We teach our students – again as future leaders, to appreciate diversity, be inclusive, and accept different views. This is a far cry from promoting minority perspectives. It is more about respecting the secular nature of our society, acknowledging its ethnic and linguistic pluralism and engaging with others in an open and honest way. We are creating innovative ways to teach students with disabilities. NU is not just about creation of knowledge. We are concerned with good teaching and conveying good values, and instilling the importance of service to the wider community in the nation's young future leaders. Students demonstrate increasing appreciation of the opportunity granted to them to study at NU; they are willing to pay back society by venturing into start-ups and thus creating new jobs and opportunities for others. Many have chosen to become social entrepreneurs such as the founders of Mama Pro – schools for disabled children, AquaPoint – a free and clean water system at secondary schools in rural areas, Infinite Bilim – online Math classes in Kazakh language for rural children, and many others.

Where to from here?

We have many tasks ahead of us: we want and must join the ranks of leading global universities, and that means accreditations of our various programs and as an institution is a priority. We want to internationalize NU's student body so that our future leaders are exposed to and form lifelong bonds with similarly talented peers and likely future leaders from other countries. Nudged by our founder, Mr. Nazarbayev, NU is embarking on a focused journey to make disruptive technology and data-driven development work for us and the nation. Big data, machine learning, artificial intelligence, smart city concepts, industry 4.0 all raise also the question of how higher education has to adapt to these breakthroughs, and how universities will continue to provide value. These are challenges that NU will gladly take on. Ten years in a life of a university are akin to having just learned how to walk upright with only occasional slips on the ice. But we know that to achieve our goals we have to learn to run and to jump over the barriers we know we will encounter. Mindful of these challenges, in spring this year we have launched a university-wide transformation program led by our younger colleagues. We have set ourselves ambitious goals for the next ten years including showing up in the global rankings of top universities in a respectable bracket. More importantly, we have renewed our commitment to working with and sharing knowledge and good practices with Kazakhstan's top universities. We intend to build a strong network of quality research universities in the country, so that together we will be able to take on the world, and invite the world to come and discover Kazakhstan's next generation. We want to attract global talent, and global brains rather than being worried about losing our own.

We invite you all to join us for this exciting journey that will turn our founder's dream into reality.