

Loretta O'Donnell, Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan

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Kazakhstan, like its Russian neighbour to the north, is currently on a mission to revamp its educational system and plug itself into the landscape of international higher ed. *The PIE* spoke with Loretta O'Donnell, vice provost of Academic Affairs at Nazarbayev University in the capital Nur-Sultan (formerly known as Astana), about how the industry is being swept up in the Central Asian nation's push for reform and internationalisation.



Photo: Nazarbayev University

About Callan Quinn

Callan first began her media career in China with the expat magazine City Weekend. After travelling around Australia and New Zealand, she went on to launch an NGO-focused magazine in Somaliland and later worked as a freelance editor for China Daily. She has also lectured at Frantz Fanon University and Tianjin Polytechnic on academic English and cross-cultural communication.

"Nazarbayev University is considered a national flagship university"

The PIE: Let's jump straight in. How would describe the state of higher education in Kazakhstan at the moment?

Loretta O'Donnell: It's very complex. There are well over 100 universities here serving a population of about 18 million people. That's a relatively high number. Typically you would expect one Research University for every three million people and one more general university for every one million.

What's happened in the last 20 years is that the Republic of Kazakhstan has invested very heavily in a specific type of schooling system coordinated by intellectual schools. They are very well resourced and have a large number of internationally-trained teachers.

Students in these schools are increasingly of interest to universities around the world who are starting to give those graduates plus other top Kazakh high school graduates full scholarships to study bachelor's degrees.

There's also a very deep and genuine respect for education in this country. There's a national day of knowledge on September 1st when students celebrate teachers and teaching.

“There's also a very deep and genuine respect for education in this country”

When I saw that my first year here and I thought 'wow Australia would really benefit from something like that'.

The PIE: How does Nazarbayev University fit into the landscape?

LO: Nazarbayev University is considered a national flagship university and we are very well resourced to meet the big ambitions that the nation has for its move towards a knowledge economy.

We have approximately 500 international professors from 69 countries who are all remunerated at international levels, have the opportunity to travel to international conferences once a year and have access to a range of research grants.

The PIE: How did you get involved with the university?

LO: I was previously associate dean of the business school at the University of New South Wales. I got a call from a recruiter and they said my name had been mentioned for a job in Kazakhstan. She offered me the chance to visit the country and told me to go with an open mind.

I met a lot of people in those three days and I was very impressed with the vision that the country had to move from a dependence on oil and gas and to really look at higher education as the way of achieving a knowledge economy.

My title today is the vice provost of Academic Affairs. If you're familiar with the British system or Australian system, it's similar to the deputy vice-chancellor of academics.

I oversee the quality of our programs consistent with European standards and guidelines. Even though we're not a European university, we take the best of all systems.

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I also make sure that we meet international standards for academic integrity, that we have appropriate professional education for our faculty and that we are creating an overall environment where students can be fulfilled.

The PIE: Academic integrity has been an issue in Kazakhstan. How is Nazarbayev University changing that?

LO: For the last four years we've run an Academic Integrity Conference focusing on the essential elements of integrity. This system is reinforced both within the classroom and beyond the classroom.

We've really come to realise that students are our best allies in this process because good students want to study and they don't want shortcuts.

The interesting thing is that the Academic Integrity Conference has only been one part of this process. There's also an entity called the Integrity League, which is sponsored by the Ministry of Education.

It's a group of about 20 universities that have signed a set of principles to make the process of academic integrity more explicit.

The PIE: Is educational reform a pattern across other post-Soviet nations or is this unique to Kazakhstan?

LO: That's a good question and I don't know that I've got a good answer for that. But I do know that it's very much front and centre here in Kazakhstan.

Our Academic Integrity Conference is attracting quite a large number of participants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, the Russian Federation and other nations. They are coming to explore these issues with us because we go in saying we don't have all the answers, we're just putting important questions on the table.

The PIE: How else does the university cooperate with universities around the world?

LO: This is my favourite question. The way the university was able to accelerate its development very early when it was just being built is it entered into its first strategic partnership with UCL and they provided a full-service foundation year for our students.

The university preparation program set for the first five years was totally conducted by UCL. Now we run it ourselves. For our Graduate School of Business, we also worked very closely with the School of Business at Duke University. They gave us a lot of advice on everything from designing classrooms and recruiting faculty to helping to design curriculum and providing faculty research and study abroad opportunities.

The PIE: Are you involved with any of China's Belt and Road Initiative education projects?

LO: In September 2013, when president Xi Jinping of China announced the Belt and Road Initiative, he actually came to Nazarbayev University to make the announcement. He could see even then that Kazakhstan was a key part of the Belt and Road, not just geographically but culturally.

“When president Xi Jinping of China announced the Belt and Road Initiative, he came to Nazarbayev University”

The simple way of seeing it is as an opportunity to build infrastructure to move goods from China to Europe more efficiently and effectively. Another way of looking at it is an opportunity to re-examine some of the heritage of the Silk Road countries. I'm working with some colleagues here at Nazarbayev University and some colleagues in the US presenting a paper on exactly this topic in China soon. I come from a business school so my interest in this is looking at how to commercialize that heritage in a way that's culturally sensitive and respectful while also helping preserve and protect old sites and then reimagine them in the modern era. There's also a university alliance for the Silk Road, which includes 135 countries. Not all of them are connected to the Silk Road because it includes New Zealand, Canada and Finland, but a lot of people are interested in the alliance because there are opportunities to travel and recalibrate what the Silk Road might mean for education.

The PIE: What should industry-watchers expect from Kazakhstan over the next few years?

LO: There are probably two main things. One is that we are developing very talented students. The other one is that we are seeking talented students because we are developing a range of scholarship and benefits packages to make it [easy for international](#) students to study here.

We're very strong in areas like robotics, artificial intelligence and solar cell engineering, which I think international students are increasingly finding attractive.

“There's a lot of optimism and it really is tangible”

But it's really a two-way street. We feel we're developing talent for the world but at the same time, we're seeking talent that we can continue to develop.

People will be surprised. In fact, recently I heard some young Chinese students saying they had stereotypes about Kazakhstan. They thought it was just the steppe and there would be lots of horses and yet when they came they couldn't believe how modern it was.

And that's why Kazakhstan is worth visiting. There's a lot of optimism and it really is tangible.