

**TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY:  
SOME ISSUES FOR KAZAKHSTAN AND THE WIDER REGION**

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This short presentation commented on three issues relating to students' transition from school to higher education: selection; curriculum and teacher training. In all cases the observations point towards the crucial importance of schools and universities working in a close partnership based on mutual respect. The comments were derived primarily from experience and research in Kazakhstan conducted with colleagues from Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education:

**Selection**

Our work on this is still in progress, but all the evidence so far indicates that UNT scores are not good predictors of subsequent success in higher education or at least few people in higher education seem to believe that they are, though the whole system relies heavily upon them. One of the difficulties about answering the question is that records which might allow one to make proper comparisons between UNT scores, completion rates and final degree standards are just not available.

An important qualification to this point is that among the things that success in the UNT does assess are, in all probability, strong motivation to succeed, a willingness to work really hard at something and good powers of retention. For some this is one of the main benefits of the UNT:

*“What is the best way to bring someone up? The answer is – hard work. We keep telling them that they work hard when they study 17 subjects. They should not get tired from it. If you go to take the UNT...; there are 35 thousand questions in 5 subjects and 7 thousand questions in one subject.... They should not see it as a problem. Because the less we work, the more we get lazy.’ (ii-S-E-2-Deputy\_Director)*

However, when one considers what are the intellectual qualities that higher education expects in its students and compares these with what the UNT tests, it would be a remarkable coincidence if the latter was to prove a predictor of the former.

I may be wrong, but I suppose that HE might require students, for example:

To make comparisons (eg between two poems or plays, between photos of a healthy and unhealthy pair of lungs, between photos of two landscapes)

To evaluate evidence (eg alternative accounts of historical events,

To explain how or why something is as it is (eg why a particular combination of chemicals produces a particular effect; how some plants survive without soil; how Kazakhstan came to have the mixed population that it has today)

To develop an argument (eg a proof in mathematics; to write an essay in history a question such as ‘Why did the Revolution of 1917 succeed where the revolution of 1905 had failed?’)

To conduct a small scale inquiry or experiment

To evaluate and critique an on-line resource or a piece of writing

Are not these the sort of competencies that we seek to develop in universities?

But by contrast the UNT tests almost exclusively memorisation and recall – *“Only information..”* (iv-S-A-2-Mathematics\_teacher). Both of these are, no doubt, helpful in higher education, but hardly a sufficient sample of the sorts of things that a university is or should be interested in.

One ex-school principal again describes his view that students' focus at the end of school is simply to pass the UNT but this time it is to the neglect of the rest of the curriculum:

*“When a pupil gets to the 10 – 11 grade, he or she won’t pay attention to other subjects. It seems children think that test subjects are more important than others.” (ii-LG-A-1-Vice-Director)*

This leads to individuals appearing to feel less well-educated than previous generations. In other words, the narrow scope of the testing in the current UNT means that it fails to function as a predictor of performance in higher education while at the same time leading to a narrowing of what is actually taught in schools – which brings us to curriculum.

### **Curriculum**

Good curriculum planning – for universities as much as for schools - requires attention to (at least) four key principles of curriculum design: continuity, progression, differentiation and coherence. These apply to universities as much as to schools. And they apply to the transition in learning as students move from one to another. Let me note these and then comment on some of the implications for HE.

*Continuity and progression:* Of course, for many students, moving from school to university will mean a movement into a new subject area, such as law, business management or architecture, which have not been studied in school as such. Nevertheless the principles still apply. One would hope that the mathematics studied at school provided a relevant platform for the demands of engineering and for social science and that the university could build upon the knowledge and understanding acquired in school (continuity) at the same time as extending this (progression). Equally the language skills acquired in school should provide a solid foundation on which HE can build. If this is not the case, then it seems to me that those responsible for schools and for universities need urgently to get together to decide how this continuity and progression can be achieved.

This issue assumes new significance as the school curriculum itself goes through changes: a new focus on all four language skills; the introduction of project work in science; in some schools the introduction of the use of English as a medium of instruction for science; group work; more emphasis on the sort of intellectual skills outlined above. The generations of students that are going to enter higher education over the next decade will be bringing new knowledge, skills and understanding. Universities need to understand this and to revise their teaching to reflect what will hopefully be more advanced levels of achievement.

*Differentiation:* This is a well accepted principle in higher education in so far as universities allow and require specialisations in line with students’ interests, career ambitions and capacities. One size does not fit all in higher education. But there are some rather particular issues that need to be addressed in the current context if what is taught in higher education is going to reflect significant differences in students’ achievements. For example, some students – but of course not all -- are already arriving in universities after completing 12 rather than 11 years of schooling. Are universities responding adequately to their new levels of achievement?

### **School university partnerships in curriculum planning, assessment and in teacher education:**

Everything I have said so far points to the importance of close collaboration between schools and universities in the interests of the best possible education for the students in whose careers and career development they share. The design of the school curriculum should be something in which schools and universities (and employer organisations and parent groups) can all play a full part. The same applies to assessment: any system of end of school assessment has to fulfil some different functions – reporting on achievement at the end of schooling, assessing suitability for entry to higher education and providing guidance on the suitability of the student for different career options. The interests of the student require high quality and on-going collaboration between these interested parties.

The requirement for university school collaboration applies in a different way when it comes to teacher education. These students are, like any others, students of the university studying for a degree. But they are also seeking to develop professional skills and understanding that will equip them to teach. Schools have at least two kinds of interest in these students and the higher education provision that is made for them: first they have an interest as future employers in ensuring that these future teachers are actually equipped to succeed as teachers; but, secondly, *school* teachers also have much of the professional understanding and skills that students need to acquire. By contrast, few staff in the universities and Pedagogic Institutes have the basis of *recent and relevant* experience of teaching in schools from which to contribute to their students' development of these skills and understanding.

If this analysis is correct, then the argument for a strong partnership between schools and universities in the education of teachers is, I believe, an overwhelming one, and this extends both to the joined deliver of training in universities and the co-supervision and assessment of students on an extended period of teaching practice.

In short, I have argued throughout this presentation that, in the interests of the students in whose education they share, and in particular in the interests of a successful transition between school and university and (for teachers) university and school, schools and universities need to talk to each other – about curriculum, about assessment, about teacher training -- and to work together, respecting the different contributions that both can make to the continuing development of education in Kazakhstan.