

UNIVERSITY/INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS: PROMISING PRACTICES FROM THE FIELD

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Over the several years I have led a research team from the University of Pennsylvania and Nazarbayev University along with my co-principal investigator from Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education, Dr. Aida Sagintayeva. Together our team has visited 25 universities in seven cities in Kazakhstan learning more about how these institutions and their leaders are responding to higher education reforms. I'd like to offer some reflections on partnerships on the basis of what we've seen.

In 2007 the OECD – World Bank report on Kazakhstan said the following:

There is limited ... interaction between most Kazakhstan universities and employers, compared to the world's more competitive countries. There seems to be no regular or formal involvement of employers in defining the knowledge, skills, and competitiveness on graduation." (OECD – World Bank, 2007).

Some important things have changed since that report was issued. Job preparation is a key theme in *State Programme for Educational Development 2011-2020*. And many of the universities we've visited are in the process of developing partnerships with local industry.

One example is Kostanay State University. The University has developed the concept of "Faculty Boards of Trustees." These groups are not really trustees in the traditional sense. They have no oversight role for the whole university. They actually function in ways very similar to boards of overseers that some universities in the U.S. have. (Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania are two examples.) Overseers work closely with one academic area—usually a school. The Faculty Board of Trustees at Kostanay State University work closely with academic departments. They meet regularly with them. They conduct reviews of the curriculum and offer advice about what changes might be made to ensure it is up to date and that students are getting the kind of knowledge they need to be successful in the workforce. They jointly develop internships that serve the needs of both partners. The employers benefit from these partnerships because they are able to influence the training of their future employees, which is one of their highest priorities. The university benefits by having the expertise of people in industry help shape the curriculum to make it relevant and the partnership enables them to provide students with internships that give them real-world experience.

A lot of research has been done on partnerships in the corporate sector. This literature shows that partnerships are beneficial because:

- They allow organizations to take on activities that they could not do on their own;
- Partnerships bring together people with different perspectives and that can lead to the development of new ideas and new programmes and services;
- Third, working together, partners are better able to monitor the changing environment and to identify new opportunities and potential risks (Eckel & Hartley, 2008).

We see these same benefits in university/industry partnerships as well. There is a broader trend that is happening today at universities in many parts of the world today. It is a movement away from the idea that the university is the place where the experts are and where knowledge is created and then distributed to the rest of the world to the idea that knowledge needs to be co-created. This shift is very well described in a quote from the Association of Commonwealth Universities (Bjarnason and Coldstream, 2003):

"Increasingly, academics in many disciplines are realizing that their own intellectual territory overlaps with that of other knowledge professionals working outside the university sector. [...] Knowledge is being keenly pursued in the context of its application and in a dialogue of

practice with theory through a network of policy-advisors, companies, consultants, think-tanks, and knowledge brokers as well as academics” (p. 323).

People are realizing that knowledge is best produced when expertise from all areas—the university and industry and government and others—come together to tackle difficult problems. The work universities here in Kazakhstan are taking on with local partners don’t just produce opportunities like internships, there are involving employers in discussions about the curriculum: That’s really quite remarkable. It shows the commitment not just to creating opportunities that lead to jobs or better training for students. It’s a commitment to rethinking how the university does its work.

References

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