

THE UNIVERSITY: A CENTER OF LEARNING?

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The contribution of universities to economic development

I want to begin with the significance that both the Minister and Deputy Prime-minister have attached to the university's contribution to economic development. This is clearly a theme on which one could expand very extensively, but the contribution includes a number of different dimensions, and I think it worth distinguishing some of these. Part of it is certainly about equipping an economy with higher level understanding and skills, and at the moment many international companies coming into Kazakhstan have to bring these with them or seek in the international market place, higher level skills, which in future, one hopes. Kazakhstan will be able to supply through its own higher education system.

University scholarship and research can make a major contribution, as both the Minister and Deputy Prime-minister indicated, as a resource for business innovation, but I would make a plea that you don't just think in terms of the contributions of science and technology. Some of the leading international companies gain their competitive edge not just from their technology, but their design: there is an aesthetic to architecture, engineering and all kinds of manufactured products that one neglects at some peril. The technologies used by companies in car production, household items and computers are very commonly the same. But it is that extra edge of design which takes the products and makes more competitive internationally. When the multi-facted British company, Virgin (which includes the production and sale of popular music, an airline and financial services) approached my previous university for assistance in helping its senior management to think 'out of the box', as they put it, it wasn't the science department we took them to; we joined them with the philosophy department and with the creative writing department. These were the departments, which they saw as having the capacity to help them think imaginatively and critically and differently. So, please, Let's not get entirely locked into this assumption that it is just science and technology that are going to contribute to national development.

Universities are, in addition, a magnet too for international business investment. If our Department of Trade and Industry identifies international companies interested in locating in the UK, one of the first places it brings them to is the nearest university, not least, because in the universities they will meet people from their own country, because our universities are cosmopolitan, they're international universities. Business people find reassurance in the fact that if they bring their company to our location, people in the company will find compatriots whom they can talk to and engage with, people with high level skills, as well as other resources that universities can supply. (One company was delighted to find that our Engineering department could offer the use of a wind tunnel.)

It is, I think, right, too, that Nazarbayev University and other universities in Kazakhstan are looking to provide not just for students from Kazakhstan itself, but to attract students internationally. There is an international trade in higher education from which the United Kingdom, for example, profits enormously and one of things that Kazakhstan can do, and other universities in this region too, is to correct that imbalance of trade by making themselves attractive to people from the international community.