Chapter 8

Concluding remarks

This chapter gives concluding remarks and summarises the broader challenges Kazkahstan is facing in relation to quality, labour market relevance, access, research and innovation, funding and governance. Even if there is no single key to effective implementation, certain broad principles can help ensure that progress is made and that this progress bears results. It is important to tackle change in an inclusive way, working with civil society and all stakeholders to build a working consensus on the direction of change and on the reasons behind it.

Over the course of its two-week mission in Kazakhstan, the OECD review team had the chance to visit over 20 higher education institutions in six cities. We were impressed in particular by the students whom we met during these visits. They spoke to us with enthusiasm and with seriousness, and expressed a commitment to learning. As Kazakhstan faces the challenges of diversifying an economy that is still too dependent on the extractive sector, and as it seeks to address the challenges of unequal opportunity, the country's youth really is its most important resource.

This review has argued that, if they are to succeed in the economy of the coming decades, people will need a broad range of skills and knowledge – and countries will need a strong capacity to innovate. Since the time of the 2007 OECD/World Bank review, Kazakhstan has made progress towards ensuring that its higher education system can help deliver the skills, knowledge and innovation that are needed. Efforts have perhaps been most pronounced in the area of research and innovation at universities. Other reforms – such as incremental moves towards replacing the attestation process with true accreditation and the encouragement of student mobility through programmes like Bolashak and Serpin – are also very promising. Policy makers and academic leaders appear to understand the challenges the higher education sector still faces, and they recognise the need for further action.

Each of the chapters of this review outlines concrete actions that Kazakhstan could take to further modernise higher education and to ensure that all young Kazakhstanis have the chance to access (if they so choose) a quality higher education that builds the skills and knowledge needed for prosperity, well-being and a rich civic life. Further reform will not always be easy, but if it is successful, Kazakhstan will be well-positioned to meet the challenges, and seize the opportunities, of the coming decades. There are some significant obstacles in the country's way, though. Rather than review recommendations once more in detail, it is useful to focus here on three of these challenges.

The issue of the funding available to higher education remains critically important. Higher education is poorly funded in Kazakhstan, and the majority of its funding comes from private sources. The review team recognises that the country has limited financial resources and that these need to meet a broad variety of needs. Nevertheless, it is absolutely critical to make substantial investments in the future, building the knowledge and skills of the youth who will be the citizens and make up the workforce of the coming decades, and laying the groundwork for innovation. The team identified a number of areas that require additional investments – both on the instructional side and in university research.

The review team also identified ways in which current investments might be made more effective. The current system of financing higher education through state grants, whose award depends primarily on results achieved on standardised tests, needs to change. Kazakhstan should seriously explore ways of shifting public funding to better support students who face financial need, and it should take action quickly. Improvements to the primary and secondary school systems, so that all students leave school ready for higher education or other post-secondary opportunities, are also absolutely critical. These too will require public investments, new ways of teaching and new forms of institutional behaviour.

The issues of governance, trust, and the relationship between higher education and the state are another challenge that, if not addressed, will remain an obstacle to progress. Over the past decade, there have been some moves towards greater institutional autonomy. Such autonomy is necessary if higher education is to mature and be fully responsive to the changing needs of Kazakhstan's economy and society. However, the higher education system is still subject to a strong, centralised control function that does not serve it well – and that manifests itself for instance in curricula that are not fully responsive to the needs of students and the labour market, or in barriers to international co-operation.

This relationship between higher education and the state is rooted in history, and in part reflects a lack of trust between the main partners. Moving forward, Kazakhstan needs to ensure that its higher education institutions further develop the capacity to operate autonomously and that they address issues such as possible corruption that may hinder their progress. The country cannot wait, though, for "ideal conditions" before it further enhances the autonomy of higher education: concrete decentralisation measures can themselves build institutional capacity for self-governance. Yet at the same time, as they move to grant institutions more autonomy, the government and national funding agencies need to make certain that sound accountability and performance measures are in place.

Finally, the issue of how Kazakhstan gathers and uses data and information on higher education came up repeatedly in our review. For instance, the award of the state grant to students – which means that some students go to certain programmes for free, while the majority of students pay full tuition – appears to be based on information about labour markets that does not fully take into account future uncertainty nor the need for a broad mix of skills within the economy. Kazakhstan could collect reliable information on a variety of labour market outcomes of its graduates and provide this information to prospective students in ways they found useful; this could provide an important corrective to current planning approaches and thus help reinforce the alignment between higher education and emerging labour market needs.

More generally the team noted that the information that policy makers and academic officers need to make sound, strategic decisions – and to enhance the performance of existing programmes and initiatives – appears not to be available. This is true in a broad range of areas. Building a better approach to information and data is challenging. Nevertheless, relative to the expenditures that Kazakhstan is already making in higher education, it is not one that should be thought of as particularly costly. In fact, by ensuring that resources are used more effectively, better data and information will likely actually reduce net costs that the higher education system faces.

The review team recognises that many of the actions it recommends will be difficult to put into place: some require new funding, others require decisions that affect the interests of certain individuals or groups of individuals, and all require a co-ordinated strategic approach. How Kazakhstan deals with challenges like these must depend in large part on decisions that are made locally, grounded in the country's culture and history: there rarely are universally "right" ways to implement policy changes. The many examples contained in the chapters of this report do give some idea, though, of how other countries have approached some of the same issues.

Even if there is no single key to effective implementation, certain broad principles can help ensure that progress is made and that this progress bears results. It is important to tackle change in an inclusive way, working with civil society and all stakeholders to build a working consensus on the direction of change and on the reasons behind it. Concrete efforts to build and foster trust and capacity are critical. It is also important to recognise that progress will typically be incremental – but that if change is to gain momentum, it requires an ability to act and learn quickly. Finally, as reforms move forward, results need to be carefully monitored and used to make course corrections where necessary – or to further invest in approaches that can be shown to be working.

The review team is confident that, if Kazakhstan implements a variety of reforms to address critical areas of weakness, and does so in ways that actively build the conditions for the success of these reforms, then the next decade will see the emergence of a higher education system that is better able to meet the ambitious goals that the country has set out for itself.

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