

# The next big thing?

Kazakhstan is not for the faint-hearted exporter. But its appetite for educational improvement is voracious, finds **Julian Hall**

Writing in the *Times Higher Education* in 2012, journalist David Matthews observed: “Kazakhstan has more higher education institutions than the UK, is seven times the size of Germany in terms of land mass, but has a population smaller than the Netherlands. Factor in the legacy of a Soviet degree system and trilingual teaching in Kazakh, Russian and English, and it sounds like a recipe for an unwieldy academic sector.”

However, as Matthews went on to say, this sizeable nation with its vast mineral resources and meteorological landscape, is committed to up-skilling its people. In turn, this has created a raft of commercial opportunities for foreign providers in the education and training sectors.

The context for all this has been the steadily increasing flow of foreign investment in Caspian oil. Economic growth averaged around 8% in Kazakhstan between 2000 and 2010, by which time GDP had grown to 10 times the level it was in the mid 1990s.

Matthew Anderson of TVET UK

(Technical & Vocational Education & Training UK), which is at the forefront of exploring the country’s education investment potential, notes that Kazakhstan now wants to diversify away from dependence on oil and gas into agriculture, tourism and engineering. And education is key to that transition. “It wants to be an independent, competitive world country, move up the rankings and become a place that people want to do business with,” he notes.

## The grand plan

In response, the Kazakh government has set out an ambitious national education programme covering the period 2011 to 2020. According to Tim Sowula of the British Council, “This is aimed at learning from the best of relevant world experience in order to establish a modern and effective national education system”.

The programme also dovetails with the national economic growth plan, the ‘2050 Strategy’, whose aim is for Kazakhstan to be amongst the world’s 30 most-developed countries by 2050. That target is not unrealistic by any stretch: the World Bank predicts Kazakhstan

will already have become a high-income country by 2020.

As part of the 2050 programme GDP expenditure on education will rise to 5% by 2020, says UK Trade & Investment (UKTI), up from 4% in 2011. In real terms that means an investment of £53 billion during the period, with a further £100 million available for international procurement of training and consultancy expertise.

With that much cash floating about, Kazakhstan is thinking big. As part of the 2011-2020 national education programme, it aims to establish a national system of education that will equal – and be integrally connected with – the best education systems in the world.

That will involve revamping the country’s universities in line with international standards, and channeling cash into science and research. Vocational learning will be overhauled and the English language prioritised. English in fact became a mandatory subject in primary schools last year; and an increasing number of secondary schools and universities are teaching in English, too.

**UKTI has identified a series of ‘high value opportunities’ in Kazakhstan:**

### Modernisation of technical and vocational education:

A project is underway with national VET reform body Kasipkor to develop a network of world-class vocational and training colleges with international support.

### English language training:

For specific government organisations and within the broader education system.



### The Brits are coming

The clarion cry for British involvement in Kazakhstan came during a visit to the country by Prime Minister David Cameron in July 2013. This led to the establishment of the UK-Kazakhstan Intergovernmental Commission in October 2013 and a subsequent visit by former universities minister David Willetts, with representatives of UK Trade & Investment (UKTI) Education, Cambridge English and Pearson in tow.

Willetts discussed a number of co-operative ventures in education, among them e-learning in schools; English language training for civil servants and

those working on Expo 2017 (a national exhibition); and the transfer of UK vocational training and qualifications to Kazakhstan. However, Anderson allows himself a wry smile when discussing the ‘discovery’ of Kazakhstan.

“Since David Cameron’s visit everyone has decided it is the next big thing. It’s amusing to see the government ‘discover’ it when we have been here since 2007.”

Irrespective of who got there first, Kazakhstan is now ready for business and receptive to British education providers. According to Sowula the UK has a “natural but not monopolistic

advantage” in supporting reform in education, given its strong educational reputation and record of promoting the English language.

As far as the opportunities that present themselves, UKTI Education has identified Kazakhstan as a “high value education opportunity” in a range of key areas (*see boxes below*). The Kazakhstan government has also set up a raft of “trail-blazer” pilots at school, vocational and university levels, to test new ways of teaching and learning. All of these “next generation projects” are being developed in partnership with leading international education providers. ►

#### Teacher training:

A teacher education reform programme is in place to develop the learning and expertise of teachers in the public school system. There are also opportunities for the training of English language and other languages teachers.

#### Higher education:

University partnerships in undergraduate, postgraduate and research studies.

#### Major events:

Kazakhstan is due to host a number of major international events, including Expo 2017. The events could provide English language, volunteering and security training opportunities “which the UK would be well-placed to access given recent experience of hosting the London Olympic and Paralympic Games”.



Event partner:



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### Other UK partnerships in Kazakhstan...

- Haileybury School, which has campuses in both Almaty and Astana, has the largest UK private school presence in the country
- UCL is a strategic partner of Nazarbayev University (NU) which is pioneering a new approach to higher education in Kazakhstan. UCL supports the development of all of NU's undergraduate engineering programmes.
- Cambridge International Examinations is currently working with Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) to develop a new curriculum for primary and secondary school students. The aim of the collaboration is to prepare learners for university-level study and future careers.
- The British Council and Interpress deliver IELTS (International English Language Testing System) which is increasingly being used for entry-level requirements by universities, alongside its traditional role vis-a-vis study abroad and migration.

► Generally speaking, UK providers already have their feet quite firmly in the door. Examples include a college programme involving 20 partnerships between Kazakh and British providers, such as Cambridge Regional College, Warwickshire College and Loughbrough College.

Pearson and the British Council are also working as strategic partners of Kasipkor Holdings to develop a new system of vocational education in the country. And language school International House London has worked with the North Caspian Operating Company in Kazakhstan to provide training in English language and cross-cultural business skills (see box above for other examples).

### What are the barriers to further growth?

All of these providers have won deals

following international tenders, typically the method by which public contracts are doled out. However, such processes belie the complexity of doing business in Kazakhstan.

Outlining the potential challenges, UKTI notes the country is ranked 140th in the 'Corruption perception index' – worse than Russia, but better than Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. New laws to improve the business environment are often incorrectly implemented at local level, too. And there's heavy regulation with regard to filing tax returns, obtaining credit and registering property.

Immigration rules may also pose a barrier. In July this year the Kazakh government announced a year-long waiver of the need for visas for short-term (15 day) business trips for citizens of the 10 biggest investors into Kazakhstan. But while this is to be welcomed, says

Sowula, "longer term visas and work permits for resident international staff are much harder to get, with the latter subject to strict quota limitations that can be difficult for educational enterprises to satisfy."

Anderson puts a big emphasis on understanding the Kazakh culture, too. "Documents still need an official stamp, for example, not something we would even think about over here. Some people won't have access to a computer and be able to respond to emails, you have to work on their terms."

In short, he says, success in the country requires patience and understanding. "You've got to spend time there to understand people and the system. David Cameron and everyone decided Kazakhstan is the next big thing, but it can't be regarded as a 'quick fix' option." ■