

“Do what you say you’ll do!”

Head of the Steering Committee for the 2017 World Winter Universiade, Aset Abdualiyev, talks about the most important criteria for professional success in Kazakhstan, about social mobility, and about how a regular guy could become the youngest employee of the President’s Administration

- Aset, you graduated from the Kazakh-Turkish lyceum and studied abroad. So from when you were quite young you’ve been aware of the need for a good education. Tell us about your experience of studying abroad.

- I entered the Kazakh-Turkish lyceum after 6th class – and certainly it was difficult to imagine that a regular Semipalatinsk secondary school student was planning something special. Perhaps it was just an inspiration. Once, I remember, the teachers of the Lyceum visited our school and I was struck by how freely they communicated with each other in both Turkish and English. It was the desire to be fluent in two foreign languages that made me apply to the Lyceum. Many people know that in the lyceum a lot of attention is paid to studying languages and building special community with an atmosphere where it’s not the status of your parents and their finances that matter, but your intellectual potential. I studied until the 11th class in a place where there was a real cult of study. This environment and the connections the Lyceum had all over the world gave rise to a desire to continue studying at foreign universities. Some wanted to study in Turkey, whereas others chose Russia. At that time, the Bolashak program offered no scholarships for bachelors programs.

We’ve prepared for the TOEFL exam starting in the 10th class to get to a good university. I entered Gumilev Eurasian University, choosing a very achievement-oriented program, ‘International law’.

In my 3rd year I went to South Carolina as an exchange student. I always tell everyone that I was in the real America. You see, America is not New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. America is the city where I was, a city of one-storey houses in a very religious state. While studying in America, I realized what it’s like to study in such a melting-pot of cultures. There were many students from different countries, with different cultures and a highly developed ability to think freely.

Upon returning, I graduated with honors from Eurasian University and began working in the President’s Administration. I must have been the youngest employee in the Administration - I was just 21 years old. And I was often asked whose relative I was! I had to answer: "My surname is too unknown to say" (laughs - author's note).

In fact, there was no family connection, I was hired to public service due to a coincidence - I spoke languages well, studied in America, and was socially active.

My job was to prepare analytical reports and speeches. After working for about a year in the President’s Administration, I applied for a Chevening scholarship from the British Council.

- It’s not that easy to get the scholarship...

- That's right, it’s a very competitive scholarship, at that time only 5 grants were allocated for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. So I really had to prepare hard for my application. I didn't apply to Oxford or Cambridge, I really liked the University of Dundee which has a center specializing in oil and gas policy. There I received a Master of Law in Natural Resources Law and Policy. It was interesting to study how to point my country's rich resources in a constructive direction for the good of our people.

- What did the UK Masters programme give you in addition to knowledge?

- In the UK, no one runs after you and tells you to attend your lectures. You have no supervisor, no-one cares whether you are in a class or not: you’ve paid your money and it's your personal responsibility. I was

very surprised when in a lecture hall the teacher did not take roll call.

The same thing applies to the list of recommended literature - you may read it if you want or not. All the material given there just helps you to understand the subject, so I began to prepare for the classes myself, and this is what makes education in Britain different. Our university was in Scotland, near Aberdeen, the oil capital of Europe, and we interacted closely with oil companies. We met frequently with CEOs and HR directors of oil and mining companies, so we had lots of networking opportunities.

By education many people mean textbooks. In fact, education is a complex system. It consists of knowledge, experience, and connections, so it's important to strive to enter a good university, because you may forget the knowledge, and only the personal thinking skills, work skills, and friends who make you grow stay with you.

I firmly believe that education is the best social elevator. For example, I came from a humble family, had no well-connected relatives, and the only thing that helped me rise socially is education. I also realized that thanks to globalization neither you nor I are different from our generation in America or the UK. Moreover, in some respects we even surpass them as we have more stringent conditions for growth.

The Masters course lasted for a year, after which I took an internship at the head office of Chevron in San Ramon. The three-month internship helped me to see how one of the largest oil companies in the world works. No wonder that by the end of the training I'd already had several job offers from major foreign companies, but I chose to return to Kazakhstan.

The reason, no matter how lofty it sounds, was that I wanted to work for my country. I felt I could really add value here.

- You are now Head of the Steering Committee for the 2017 World Winter Universiade in Almaty. What was your experience prior to this position?

- I returned to the President's Administration in 2008, right in the middle of a storm – it was a time of crisis, and I started working in a group that dealt with oil, gas and construction. It was a very difficult time, because no one had any ready-made solutions to deal with the crisis, so I gained a very unique experience in how such decisions are made and how costly they are. I deeply respect those who were engaged day and night in this process, because I believe the government met the challenges of 2008 with dignity.

After the President's Administration, I took the decision to work in the private sector – I had a job offer from an Arab construction company that's among the top 10 global companies. They were engaged in the construction of an oil and gas plant in Karabatan.

It was an interesting experience because in the private sector you work towards a result and there are no distractions, you are given all the necessary resources and a minimum of bureaucracy. Comparing this experience with my previous one, I realize that working in public service it's difficult to focus on the result as there is more focus on the process since it has its limitations. Therefore, I really respect people in the civil service who have managed to achieve results, that is, those who take on a project, implement it until the end and fix it so that the project remains after they leave.

Two years later, I was hired to the position of vice-president at the Bolashak Centre for International Programs (CIP). At CIP, I dealt with admissions, training, and the administration of our foreign offices. We had to build the whole process correctly, and our team successfully implemented a system of electronic document submission through our Citizen Service Centers and e-gov; furthermore, we reoriented Bolashak towards vocational training.

We found out that funding one undergraduate scholarship costs as much as 3-4 Masters or 2-3 PhDs. Accordingly, the economic benefit from PhDs and masters scholarships is much higher. For this reason Nazarbayev University opened, with bachelors programmes available.

Having worked at the Bolashak Centre for two and a half years, I was offered the chance to work for the Nur Otan party as Director of the Higher Party School, which needed some modernization. We named it the School of Political Management and refocused it on training courses. One of our achievements was to

make the school self-financing. We were not expected to achieve it, but we saved the budget and attracted very good coaches. Through commercially-sold trainings we covered the costs of training for party members. We also made every effort to encourage government organizations to be more active in social networks, because there was a very interesting situation during the previous election: Nur Otan was an offline leader while the Communist Party was an online leader!

We focused on social networks and now many local administrations and parliamentarians are on Twitter and broadcast through Periscope – so we've given an opportunity for them all to get feedback from the public directly and communicate without intermediaries.

Three months ago, I was hired as Head of the Steering Committee of the 2017 World Winter Universiade in Almaty.

I firmly believe this is a very important project since it's the biggest multisport event in the history of Kazakhstan. It's larger than the Asian Games, and in the table of ranks it comes second only to the Olympic Winter Games. All the participants are professional sportsmen, future or current Olympic champions or medalists. The specifics are that there is an age limit - 28 years maximum - and competing sportsmen must be university students. It's important to understand that the competition will be among national teams, not between universities.

For 10 days, Kazakhstan and Almaty in particular will have a television audience of 1 billion people watching the competition on the major TV channels on all continents.

- Describe your working day as a head of the committee. What do you do exactly, how large is your team and what goals do you have?

- I took on the project at a very difficult time. We're witnessing a severe correction of the exchange rate, and we have a lot of foreign currency expenses. Of course, we understand the need to save money and the first thing we did when starting the project three months ago was to revise the budget and cut it in half. Originally it was about 33 billion tenge whereas we've now reduced it in tenge two times over, and in dollar terms it's reduced four times. Currently, the budget for the Universiade is 50 million dollars.

We work seven days a week, with no holidays. The morning starts at 7-8 a.m. with a visit to construction sites, then almost every day we work together with our partners - the city administration and also supervising officials in the government, Dariga Nursultanovna in particular.

We also work with the International Federation. The day ends at 9-10 p.m. because we have a big time difference.

- How many people are there in the Committee team?

- Currently we have about 100 people, but this year we need to hire another 150 people. We are interested in cooperation with HiPO because it's essential to involve professionals who want to get a unique chance to work on a major sports project. It will definitely deliver value to their CVs.

- What challenges did you face in addition to the shortage of staff and budget cuts?

- There are many factors I am concerned with. For example, the absence of snow may be a problem. We need not merely need the presence of snow, but a mix of artificial and natural snow, and there are some requirements for the quality of the snow cover. It imposes great challenges, but we are preparing for any natural forces!

- Many people don't see the value of these events because they are not affected. Although if you give an opportunity to local residents and businesses to derive benefit, the event will do better. How do you plan to involve the business community and residents in the project?

- Many people ask why we need the Universiade. Let's look at the advantages: first, it is a counter cyclical measure to support the economy. Currently, the project is investing in infrastructure; construction of an ice rink for 3 thousand people, an ice arena for 12 thousand people, and the Olympic village for 5 thousand people is in full swing. Building material facilities are working actively, providing employment to the people.

The construction of the project facilities alone involved about 50 thousand people, and that means that about 200 thousand families have an income. Kazakhstani companies, developing the region's economy and local businesses, will provide more than 50% of all works and services.

Secondly, we're not building useless facilities: everything we build will be used by the city after the event. This is very important. After the Universiade, which will last only 10 days, we will get a huge legacy at our disposal.

We will modernize almost all the sports facilities in the city to meet international standards. There will be three new facilities offering winter sports clubs. For example, an ice arena for 12 thousand people will be built that allows the ice cover to be changed to a hard cover for volleyball, basketball, tennis, concerts, etc. during a single day.

The Athletes' Village for 5 thousand people will become a new residential area that will be used as rental housing for teachers and as student dormitories after the Universiade. All of this will be affordable for regular people.

Our goal is to reach synergies: in an economically difficult time we provide employment opportunities for Almaty; secondly, we hand the infrastructure over to locals and attract sports tourists.

We understand that the times of 100% government funding are gone, so we want to attract businesses to public-private partnership as much as possible. For example, why buy vehicles for the Universiade if we can purchase transport services from taxi companies, car fleets, etc.

Another example of a problem we want to solve together with businesses and residents is tourist accommodation. In Almaty, there are a total of 12 thousand hotel rooms of various types, ranging from youth hostels to the Ritz. This means that we cannot currently accommodate all the expected tourists and guests. Therefore, we want to cooperate widely with local companies and all local services with which Almaty citizens would be willing to lease out their flats and even separate rooms for tourists. It will be exciting for tourists to make contact with the locals. It is a cool experience for all and it's an accepted worldwide practice to share private apartments and earn some extra income. This is a division of labor and Almaty citizens can participate.

Now, let's think why this is interesting for businesses. For example, there are expensive ticketing systems, but we do not want to buy them because there are services such as Tikeon and other online companies that can become partners and set up their scanning system at turngates. If they do, they will be able to earn by selling tickets for all future competitions that will be held on these facilities. In this regard, our task is to help them develop their business.

We are also ready to work with HiPO because recruiting companies come to us and say they want to get 15 percent of the salaries of those we hire. What for? If there are new formats and we like your service, you can form a team for us and, for example, provide volunteers. Why not?

So I'd like to encourage all businesses and companies who want to grow to meet with us, make proposals, and we'll be happy to consider them. You can contact me directly.

- How much time left until the opening ceremony?

- January 29, 2017 is the date of the Universiade opening ceremony, so we have less than a year. We are already preparing for the event by holding test competitions. Over 2016, the project facilities will hold ski jumping competitions, and an international ice hockey, curling, and figure skating championship. It all will test our readiness!

- What are other fields of work of your team?

- One example: we're currently inspecting all the restaurants and hotels in Almaty. We will include in our 'recommended' list only the places with English-speaking staff, POS-terminals, Internet access and a suitable quality of service to recommend them to all tourists.

As a result, these places will have an influx of new customers, both foreign and domestic. We want to improve the overall quality of service in Almaty since these days not just countries, but cities compete for

tourists. Shanghai and Almaty currently have more in common than China and Kazakhstan.

Therefore, we will teach basic English to the police, public utilities staff, and car drivers absolutely for free. We have negotiated with the major universities of Kazakhstan and their departments of English language will train public utilities staff to speak and answer basic questions. We want to upgrade Almaty to a higher level of service, tourism, and infrastructure to make it more attractive for everyone, including for residents themselves.

- What's the most important skill for professional growth, from your perspective?

- The most important skill for anyone is to 'do what you say you'll do'. This is the most essential factor for anyone to be successful. It seems to me or at least I see a lot of people on Facebook who talk, talk, talk, but in the end do nothing. There's a Kazakh saying that says 'the words must meet the actions'. We need to focus on results. Many people think that the process itself IS the result, but I do not agree.