



The Modern Challenges of Higher Education Institutions in Armenia

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the modern key issues hindering the development of higher education institutions in Armenia. The article also refers to the issues related to the legislative regulation of the higher education sphere in Armenia, the internationalization of state universities, the institutional autonomy, the formation of governing councils, educational programs, accreditation, the connection of higher education institutions with the labor market, as well as the funding sources of higher education institutions and the research activities. As a result of the analysis, certain suggestions have been outlined, which, according to the authors, can contribute to the solution of the issues under discussion.

Keywords: *Higher education institutions; Armenia; funding sources of higher education institutions; institutional autonomy; challenges to national higher education system.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The basis of economic growth and development of countries is the human capital, which determines the significant role and importance of the education system. The education system ensures the sustainable and extended economic development of the country, increases national competitiveness, strengthens democracy and security. The educational system influences the formation of the scientific, economic, cultural, spiritual potential of the country, promotes the progress of the nation in line with the progress of world civilization [1].

Before the restoration of independence, being part of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Armenia made considerable progress in the sphere of education and science. With the collapse of the USSR and the abolition of the socialist order, the educational system, like other systems, was gradually transformed. The value system of Soviet society also changed. The values based on the former Soviet ideology ceased to function, and the new, more democratic values and traditions were not fully formed.

In Armenia, which gained independence and was building a more liberal system, the society found itself in a 'value void'. The already complex transformations and systemic reforms taking place in various political, economic, and social spheres were further complicated by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the economic blockade, the energy crisis, and as a result of the collapse of the Soviet unified academic-industrial system. Armenia began to develop a new educational system in unprecedentedly difficult conditions.

Nevertheless, the gradual reduction in the number of students due to emigration, the low level of salaries in this field, the rapid, massive, insufficiently controlled entry of private universities into the higher education system, and the influence of many other factors inevitably degraded the quality of education.

Thus, 30 years after independence, and almost a decade and a half after joining the Bologna Process, the Armenian education system is still full of many problems that interfere its performance, the full implementation of its mission as a driver of Armenia's strategic development.

2. ANALYSIS

Noteworthy is the fact that one of the primary issues of higher education in Armenia is the legislative issues and state regulation of the higher education system. Dozens of higher education institutions operating in Armenia and depending on their legal status (e.g., state, private, foreign) function in different legal fields. Thus, state universities in academic issues are under the multipurpose control of the government. The government approves the content of the entrance exams and organizes them in a centralized manner. State universities agree with the government on the number of paid places as well. However, higher education institutions established in Armenia based on international agreements do not comply with these restrictions. It follows that the admission of the higher education institution sphere in Armenia is not the same, and foreign universities have notable privileges. The latter have competitive advantages in the selection of applicants, their education load norms, tuition fees, discounts, procurement, and other issues. In addition, the government's higher education department also intervenes in the issues on the expulsion and the reinstatement of students from public universities and their mobility among different universities.

In the 21st century education cannot be viewed exclusively from a narrow national perspective [2]. The internationalization of higher education, the monitoring of labor power supply and demand tendencies in the international labor market and the implementation of their balanced transformations in the education sphere, integration into international scientific networks, ensuring international mobility of students and scholars are among the priorities of strategic development of higher education institutions. At the same time, the enrollment of international students can increase the international prestige and ranking of universities hence providing noticeable financial inflow for higher education institutions. As the researchers on these issues point out, "Developing countries seek to attract foreign students to their universities to improve the quality and cultural composition of the student body, gain prestige, and earn income" [3].

In this regard, the law on the language of instruction in Armenia states that universities must teach resident or Armenian students in

Armenian, except for special programs designed for international students. On the other hand, some universities, such as The French University in Armenia, American University of Armenia, Russian-Armenian University, and local branches of other foreign universities are exempt from the application of this provision. This approach to some extent limits the opportunities of Armenian state universities for internationalization.

Meantime, in the management of state universities in Armenia, the role of government agencies is huge, and it is necessary to change the proportion of the board of directors in favor of the university. To increase the institutional autonomy of Armenian state universities, it is essential to define by law the organizational and legal framework that contributes to it the most. Summarizing the issue of the relationship between the government and state universities, it should be noted that the interventions in the internal affairs of the university by the government, with many frequently changing regulations, significantly restrict the institutional autonomy and academic freedom of higher education institutions. Among other things, it should be stated that this phenomenon is typical of some other countries in the post-Soviet territory, which is evidenced by the results of specific research [4].

One of the key issues in improving the quality of higher education is the change in society's values. We notice that the former public respect for teachers, lecturers, and scientists has experienced a great decline. In the digital era, the attitude towards knowledge and its bearer has changed drastically. Various factors have contributed to this, many of which are due to the unprecedented changes in the field of technology and information in recent decades, the so-called "side effects". However, this is not a purely Armenian phenomenon either. As Tom Nichols truly observes, "I fear we are witnessing *the death of the ideal of expertise* itself, a Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laypeople, students and teachers, knowers and wonderers – in other words, between those of any achievement in an area and those with none at all" [5].

To the above-mentioned statement, we should add that students, as the main beneficiaries of education, and their parents, by paying the tuition fee, sometimes demand more a graduation document or a diploma that confirms the final

results rather than a high-quality knowledge. However, education has more strategic and multifaceted functions.

Another problem with ensuring the quality of education is that Armenian higher education institutions, especially state universities, are mostly perceived as economic rather than educational institutions. This perception determines the principles of state regulation and control of the sphere. In practice, the control over the activities of Armenian universities is more focused on procedural rather than content or program issues. If the procurement process of state universities, discount mechanisms, tuition fee establishments, other areas of economic processes are in the act of permanent monitoring, then the educational programs have not been accredited so far. Until recently, universities were guided solely by educational criterias. Even though several decisions of the Government of Armenia since 2005 claim the requirement to bring the content of educational programs in line with European standards and current labor market conditions. Everything submitted by state universities has been approved for higher education specialties. The latter were granted privileges to implement educational programs in different specialties mainly based on curriculum and not on educational programs. State universities have been provided with the opportunity to have as many students as requested, often without considering expediency. As a result, universities have often included courses in curricula that are not sufficiently aimed at training highly qualified professionals, consequently receiving some educational positions that significantly exceed the demand of the labor market, and have carried out educational activities detached from the realities and requirements of the labor market.

The same importance has the transformation of the existing accreditation criterias of the universities, the inclusion of the strategy indicators proving the perspective stability in them. The current accreditation standards do not help to identify obstacles to the strategic development of universities and clarify guidelines. The lack of clear requirements for the ability to implement a university curriculum, the lack of clearly measurable strategic indicators for the accreditation of university curricula, the lack of a methodology, do not allow either the universities or the sphere regulators to assess in advance the university's real capacity to

implement the curriculum, as well as the institutional capacities of medium-term and long-term stability. The current methodology does not allow to identify the vulnerabilities of the universities through current assessment and to take steps to eliminate them.

The next key issue in the sphere is the weak link between higher education and the labor market, as well as the vague and non-targeted requirements of employers for professionals with higher education [6]. In this regard, one of the important criteria for assessing the quality of higher education in the Bologna education space is the degree of involvement of external stakeholders in the education process. In developed countries, university-labor market cooperation is usually at a high level. The involvement of large companies in the development of higher education programs and joint educational programs is a common practice [7]. Moreover, the development and delivery of educational programs based on such principles are often funded by large employers. A significant part of the budget revenues of those universities is formed from suchlike collaborations, which allows the universities to be more independent. Unfortunately, despite some attempts, such cooperation in Armenia continues to be at a rather low level, as a result of which universities often develop unrealistic educational programs that do not meet the requirements of the labor market and employers. Nevertheless, “tomorrow’s competitive advantage of higher education institutions will be driven by the ability to identify, consume, produce, and govern the complex information inside and outside university walls” [8]. The created situation is also due to the lack of clearly formulated targeting requirements for employers with higher education professionals.

The next possible obstacle to the development of Armenian higher education institutions is the insufficient level of scientific and research activities. At the same time, the academic staff of Armenian universities is rather weakly represented on international academic platforms and scientific networks [9]. In general, international scientific cooperation is also at a lame level.

It is known that a substantial part of the activity in the universities of developed countries is the research activity, which is very vital both for building the academic reputation and prestige of the institution, as well as for attracting additional

financial resources. Moreover, active research activity allows to maintain and improve the qualification of the academic staff. And academic qualifications, according to a comprehensive study by University of Hannover scholar Ingo Liefner, are key factors in ensuring long-term university success [10].

The research activity of universities is an important social function too, which is aimed at the development of science as one of the main components of the university’s activity, the creation of new knowledge. Research activities at the university are the basis for providing quality higher education and the source of new knowledge, which ensures the training of high-quality specialists and the generation of innovative ideas. In this context, in order to promote the research activities of universities, it is necessary to solve certain issues. In particular:

- Legislative regulations of scientific activity;
- Resource and infrastructure provision of research activities in universities;
- Increase the density of research components in educational activities;
- Expanding opportunities for commercialization of research results;
- Introduction of mechanisms for the promotion of research and innovative activities of the academic staff.

In the context of the issue under discussion, we should note that the dependence of universities on one source of funding is highly undesirable [11]. In this regard, one of the key problems of Armenian higher education institutions is the lack of financial resources and the low level of income diversification. Generally, the main source of income for Armenian universities remains the funds generated from students’ tuition fees, which on average make up 70-90% of the budget. Such dependence on student tuition fees has a negative impact on the quality of education, as the expulsion of the students with insufficient progress from the university can lead to serious financial difficulties for universities. In countries with a quality education system, the sources of funding for universities are diverse, including endowments, donations from individuals and organizations, various educational and research grants, public and private research orders, etc. It is no coincidence that, for example, in the United States “Higher education institutions have increasingly devoted more resources to alumni affairs and development activities, seeking to enhance flows

of giving from alumni, other individuals, corporations, and foundations” [12]. Therewith, the state funding for higher education is quite low. In recent years, it has accounted for only 0.3% of GDP, and 10-12% of total public funding for education.

In the 21st digital era, competition between universities is growing cardinally. Furthermore, “Technological advances have brought forth increased competition to the traditional higher ed sector. Low-cost, easily accessible online education represents a severe threat to an industry with high fixed costs” [13]. Meantime, in the process of digitalization, the university management system becomes more flexible, democratic and open to educational innovations [14]. In this regard, “Increasing competition forces the universities to modernize permanently for increased attractiveness among potential students, diversification of funding sources, improvement of level of educational services and solving the issues of improving their academic reputation successfully. In such tough competition, only those higher education institutions will succeed which will meet challenges, meet the expectations of main beneficiaries and will meet the requirements of the modern digital era” [9].

3. CONCLUSION

Armenian universities in order to be competitive in the rapidly changing global academic field of the transforming world, and be driver themselves, it is necessary to give a new impulse to the modernization and internationalization of the curricula and teaching methods, to the improvement of the educational infrastructure, introducing online education and distance learning, constantly strengthening the education component, uniting the capacities through university associations, providing access to scientific databases, staff incentive system, development of hard and soft skills, activity increasing on academic platforms, digital technologies of introducing administration automation [15].

Thus, summarizing some of the key issues of the Armenian higher education system, we should state that one of the main targets for their solution is the enhancement of the legislation regulating the higher education system, the formation of the idea of education as the main value for the development of the society for all the education beneficiaries, building equal

competitive conditions for the higher educational institutions, and reinforcing the connection between the higher education and the labor market.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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