

Making the Grade

AUA stands on 20 years experience to expand the pursuit for academic excellence

BY JOHN HUGHES

While the tricolor of independent Armenia was being raised over the parliament building on September 21, 1991, a quarter mile up the street the doors were opening on a new day in education in a building that had been a meeting place of the Supreme Soviet, the legislative body of Soviet Armenia.

On that Saturday the American University of Armenia (AUA) began as an experiment in bringing American-style higher education to the former Soviet republic. AUA opened as an English-language graduate university, a concept new in every way to the academic landscape of the time in Armenia. Today, the university is a highly respected institution that serves as a model for educational excellence.

In 1991 AUA president Bruce Boghosian was a research scientist at Thinking Machines Corporation in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was aware of the excitement surrounding his motherland, but could not have known that destiny would later put him at the helm of AUA. "I felt the excitement of the time and had some sense of what the university was," Boghosian says. "I could see the potential."

Boghosian began to acquaint himself with Armenia's academic resources through contacts with some of the country's scientists from the Yerevan Physics Institute, but it was not until 2008 that he began to visit the republic. Boghosian—who had been serving as chair of the department of mathematics at Boston's prestigious Tufts University—began his tenure as AUA president in September 2010.

He now presides over the university as it plans to institute an undergraduate program in the fall of 2013. This addition will represent a major shift in AUA's role as a center of learning and will significantly expand its impact on Armenian education. Pending approval by its American accreditation agency¹, AUA will admit 300 undergraduates in the fall of 2013.

Although an undergraduate program had been discussed while AUA was in the planning stages, the concept was rejected so the school would not be seen as competing with Armenia's established universities.

As with many other ideas of the past two decades, AUA was conceptualized when the disastrous earthquake of December 7, 1988 became, ironically, a building ground of Diaspora-Armenia relations.

Conceived from catastrophe

In 1989, Armen Der Kiureghian, professor of civil engineering at the University of California, Berkeley, was in Armenia attending a meeting to plan the reconstruction of the earthquake zone. Over breakfast one morning, he and faculty members from the Yerevan Polytechnic Institute, including rector Yuri Sargsyan, conceived the idea of an American-style technical university in Armenia.

The higher education system in Soviet Armenia, as with all the USSR, was typically a five-year course of study that came upon completion of the 10-year secondary school system.

After receiving a higher education, a top student could



AUA was once referred to as Armenia's "pentagon". In the late 1980s the building housed meetings of the Supreme Soviet and mass demonstrations encouraged lawmakers to adopt legislation freeing Karabakh from Azerbaijan.

stay at the institute or university for post-graduate studies usually lasting three years, at the end of which they would defend a dissertation.

Education was free, and students even received meager stipends, but the number of placements was limited, as the state decided how many specialists it needed for certain areas of its economy.

As the Soviet Union was collapsing, it became clear that a traditional Soviet education could not provide the training required by post-Soviet careers. There was a need for instruction in fields, such as business management, that are necessary in market-based economies.

Joining Der Kiureghian and Sargsyan in planning the new university were Mihran Agbabian, chair of the civil engineering department at the University of Southern California, and Stepan Karamardian, then dean of the A. Gary Anderson Graduate School of Management at the University of California, Riverside. Agbabian would later become AUA's first president.

As reported in *AGBU News* 20 years ago: "With one-third of the country in ruins, they realized that innovative methods would be crucial in restoring the physical and economic destruction that had taken place. As educators, they were convinced that a new institution, teaching modern western technology and concepts, would be one of the most vital first steps for the country's renewal and future progress."

The timing of the concept coincided with the ascension of Louise Manoojian Simone to the presidency of the Armenian General Benevolent Union. In an address marking AUA's 15th anniversary, Agbabian explained that Simone "took very seriously the proposal that the late Stepan

Karamardian, Armen Der Kiureghian and I made to her soon after she became president of AGBU. She embraced the idea and AGBU became the sponsor of this institution, AUA, that we love so much."

Der Kiureghian, Agbabian, and Karamardian approached the newly installed Armenian government with their proposal. With AGBU agreeing to provide funding to launch the university, the government embraced the idea, allocating a prestigious building to house the American University of Armenia. Subsequently, the creation of AUA became one of the first instances of cooperation between Armenia and the United States government, as the Congress, through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), also allocated funds that became a precedent for USAID's role in the development of Armenia.

The University of California (UC) became something of a surrogate mother in the birth of AUA. In 1990, a task force from UC visited Armenia; on the basis of their report, the university's regents unanimously agreed to a relationship that has continued to this day. UC provides technical and educational resources to support AUA, and several UC officials sit on AUA's US-based board of trustees.

This affiliation with the University of California and the invaluable guidance provided by UC officials were instrumental in AUA's becoming the first university outside the United States to receive accreditation from the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC).

With the concept formed, a physical home for the university was located in what may be considered one of the amusing ironies of Armenia's transition from socialism.

From ArmSSR to AUA

Today's young adults at AUA study Business Administration, Industrial Engineering and Systems Management, Computer and Information Science,

¹ AUA is accredited by the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), one of six agencies whose accreditation is recognized by the US Department of Education.



In 2008, the main campus expanded, with the opening of the Paramaz Avedisian Building. From left: Then-president Haroutune Armenian; Dr. Rory Hume, Chair of the AUA Board of Trustees; AUA President Emeritus Mhramyan Agbabian; Zvart Onanian and Edward Avedisian.



With the new premises, AUA president Bruce Boghosian will lead the university into the next crucial phase when it opens an undergraduate program in 2013.

Political Science and International Affairs, Public Health, Law, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and at the Acopian Center for Environmental Studies in a building that in Soviet times was commonly referred to as "the Pentagon."

Located at 40 Baghramyan Avenue, midway up a hillside called Saralanji ("mountain slope"), the main facility of AUA, with its unobstructed view of Mount Ararat, sits behind a statue honoring WWII hero Marshal Hovhannes Baghramyan.

Designed by noted architect Mark Grigorian and completed after the designer died in 1978, the building was named the Shahumian House of Political Enlightenment, along a new avenue that was being developed as Yerevan grew under the master plan of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev.

In the 1980s, communist party sessions were held in the building, during which economic development of the 37 regions of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic was discussed. It also housed a communist party school.

The last decade has seen significant expansion of facilities under the stewardship of AUA's second President, Dr. Haroutune Armenian, most notably the opening in 2008 of the Paramaz Avedisian building, which connects to the main building and which was designed with modern communications and meetings facilities.

Earlier, in 1997, construction was completed on the AUA Business Center across town on Alex Manoogian Street.

Since its founding, AUA has established seven research centers and five community outreach programs that include the Turpanjian Rural Development Program and the Garo Meghriyan Institute for Preventive Ophthalmology.

"Different"

From its initial 101 students on that first day of independence in Armenia, about 2,100 graduates have earned degrees from AUA.

One of its first students, Ararat Ghukasian, is now CEO of Byblos Bank in Yerevan. For Ghukasian and his peers, entering AUA was the start of developing a world view that extended beyond Soviet borders.

"Aside from the academic process, it was the early '90's, the first year of Armenia's independence accompanied with war and economic difficulties. AUA was more than a university, it was a cultural center," Ghukasian says now. "For the first time we could interact with American culture directly, acquire our first lessons in computer literacy and, most importantly, obtain the necessary foundation

on which to take our next steps.

"We all had a Soviet educational background and perceptions and were trying to enter a labor market in a free-market environment. It is probably accurate to describe AUA as a life-changing experience."

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist and political analyst Emil Danielyan is a 1996 graduate, whose undergraduate degree from Yerevan Polytechnic Institute was in mechanical engineering.

"That (change in career direction) was already a huge change in terms of my future professional career," says Danielyan. "At that time, in 1994, political science was not taught at the local universities as there was no such specialty during the Soviet period. And even today AUA remains the only place where you can study political science (at the post-graduate level in Armenia). In this sense this is one of the contributions that AUA has made to the general education system of Armenia."

"During those years going to AUA was like stepping into another world. Things that were commonplace at our local universities, such as widespread corruption and nepotism, truancy among students, etc. were not present at AUA. You would find yourself in a totally different world, beginning from the condition of the premises, the availability of good lighting, and ending with the moral principles and conduct that nearly excluded any corruption. It was still the years of a severe energy crisis in Armenia where one felt cut off from the rest of the world, and so AUA then was also like a window into the outside world."

For students such as Taline Djeghelian, AUA also offered a chance to "come home" to study. From Lebanon, Djeghelian graduated with a degree in marketing from AUA.

"When I decided I wanted to stay in Armenia after graduating, finding a job wasn't very difficult for me," says Djeghelian, who worked at the new Virtual Armenia College before returning to Beirut, where she is student recruitment and marketing officer at Haigazian University. "I guess the fact that my degree was from AUA had a big impact and a positive influence. I realized that being an AUA graduate meant that you would be respected for your degree. And it meant that you are different and your education is more valued."

Alumni testimonials are significant, as, in the beginning, the "foreign" university battled against perceptions that it would be an elitist school from which graduates would springboard out of Armenia to better career environments.

It has turned out, however, that about 80 percent of AUA graduates remain in Armenia – a respectable performance when considering that, since the university opened, nearly one-fourth of Armenia's population has left.

President Boghosian says that earlier concerns that AUA would "siphon" Armenia's best and brightest by making it easier for them to find lives abroad have proved unfounded.

AUA has prepared some 2,100 professionals for many careers for which Armenia does not yet provide ideal environments. And parallel to their studies, the president emphasizes, AUA students are also exposed to the concepts of "civic duty" and the "social contract." Students are taught that, along with the privilege of higher education comes great responsibility to society. Students learn that, no matter where they are, they should give something back to Armenia.

"If we do our work, it can be 'brain circulation', rather than 'brain drain,'" Boghosian says, employing a phrase used by AUA board member AnnaLee Saxenian in her book *The New Argonauts: Regional Advantage in a Global Economy*.

"Immigrants from India and China with experience in Silicon Valley have also started to influence economic development back home, both directly, by transferring technology and know-how when they return home to work or start businesses, and indirectly, by influencing policy formation and other aspects of the institutional environment," wrote Saxenian, who is dean of the School of Information at the University of California, Berkeley, making the argument that losing a country's citizen to foreign study does not necessarily mean losing that student's "citizenship."

It is a theory that is also being demonstrated by AUA graduates, says first-president Agbabian who cites an AUA alumnus who started a high-tech business in Southern California which employs more Armenians in Yerevan, with the California business serving simply as a branch office.

"Rather than making it difficult for our educated youth to leave Armenia, we should introduce in to Armenia attractive opportunities for native Armenians to stay in their homeland," Agbabian says.

Alumnus Danielyan admits that his original intention had been to leave Armenia.

"Even as an AUA student I was trying to find a way to leave Armenia, but apparently I wasn't trying hard enough," he jokes. "I can say this university in some way also kept me attached to Armenia. Were it not for AUA, I think I would have ended up studying somewhere abroad."



Since its first class, AUA has given some 2,100 master's-level degrees. Being an AUA graduate, one alumnus says "meant that you are different and your education is more valued."

Byblos Bank CEO Ararat Ghukasian is grateful that AUA offered him "a chance".

I had already learned English during my time as a student at the Polytechnic Institute to the degree that I would have at least tried to get an education abroad."

From "graduate school" to "university"

Because its founders were careful—perhaps overly so—not to upset the university environment in Armenia by establishing a radically new undergraduate system that could potentially detract from existing schools, AUA avoided the appearance of competition. (It was not until 2000 that Armenian universities saw their first "bachelor," "master," and "doctorate" equivalent degree graduates.)

But from fear of social impropriety, AUA missed a vital chance to establish a base of students from which the graduate school itself could enroll master's degree candidates.

Other outsiders were not so timid. In 1999, the (Russian-Armenian) Slavonic University opened in Yerevan, offering bachelor's and master's degrees. The following year, the French University in Armenia opened, also offering both undergraduate and graduate degrees.

In fact, by its design as a singularly a graduate-level university, AUA is unique not only in Armenia.

"How many universities in the United States," president Boghosian asks rhetorically, "offer a graduate program but no undergraduate program?" He answers that there are a few, such as the Rockefeller University in New York, but not many.

At Tufts University, Boghosian says, his undergraduate students were encouraged to do their master's program at some other university, for the sake of exposure to a different cultural and/or academic experience. But such an approach is hardly applicable in Armenia, where nearly all the major schools of higher learning share a central location in the capital.

"In the West, we think it important to be exposed to other ways of learning," Boghosian states. "That isn't the tradition here. Here the tradition is to go to grad school at the same place you did your undergraduate studies. That puts us at a disadvantage." Boghosian hopes that with the planned undergraduate program, AUA will be able to enroll students directly out of high school and provide them with the opportunity to remain in an American-accredited environment through both their undergraduate and graduate studies.

AUA will thus find itself on an even field with other Armenian universities when it begins its undergraduate program, which will at first offer degrees in English and Communication (Bachelor of Arts), Business (Bachelor of Arts), and Computational Sciences (Bachelor of Science).

The university hopes to add 300 students each year to total 1,200 in the undergraduate program by 2017—a figure that would, assuming it keeps its 400 graduate students, quadruple the current enrollment. Costs of the expansion are expected to be covered by enrollment fees and from "bridge funding" Boghosian says.

If expected numbers are reached, there would still be room for more than twice as many students in the sprawling buildings.

Agababian made an appeal for an undergraduate program a few years ago. In a paper he prepared for that purpose, the professor pointed out that there are now more than 50 private universities in Armenia, none of which appear to have interfered with the vitality of state universities, where enrollment had not shown a decline.

"I have heard from several parents of students that they are anxiously waiting for us to start an undergraduate

program so that high school graduates (from Diaspora) may study in Armenia and later enter graduate school in the U.S. or at AUA for advanced degrees," he wrote.

"I like to think of the example of Caltech (California Institute of Technology) where the emphasis is on graduate studies, but they have always kept an outstanding undergraduate program. The sum total is a University. Without the undergraduate program, it is a Graduate School."

Tuition and "need-blind" admission

AUA is unique in another regard. It adheres to two fundamental golden rules. "We are committed to the principle that no deserving student should be denied an AUA education because of inability to pay tuition," says Boghosian. "AUA has developed the ability to means test our applicants, and we give them need-based financial aid and scholarships so that all can afford to pay the tuition."

Moreover, AUA's admissions policy is "need blind." This means that the decision of whether or not to admit a student is based on academic qualifications only, and not on the amount of financial aid needed. "We physically separate the admissions applications from the financial aid applications upon arrival," says Boghosian. "We first decide who should be admitted. Then we look to see how much they need. Then we give it to them." In fact, AUA gives back almost 30% of its total tuition revenue, in the form of financial aid. Only a very small fraction of universities in the United States can claim to follow a need-blind admissions policy.

How does AUA manage to make its education affordable to all Armenian students, both from Yerevan and from other regions of the country? "We subsidize it heavily," says Boghosian. "Our tuition for Armenian students is about \$2,500 per year. The actual cost of educating them is about \$10,000 per year. We are immensely grateful to all of our donors who believe deeply in our mission. Their gifts and endowments make it possible for us to offer high-quality American education at Armenian prices. Our tuition revenues do not come close to paying for the kind of education that our students receive."

Offering a "chance"

Asked how he would grade the 20-year performance of the university he helped conceive in the midst of disaster, Agababian replies, "I would rate it as very good progress over the years thanks to dedicated faculty and staff, to support from the Armenian Diaspora—mainly from the US Diaspora, to cooperation with the Armenian government through the Ministry of Education and Science, and to good students. In later years the alumni also had a positive role in support of AUA. My expectations were certainly fulfilled.

"We had vision but little experience, and the success of AUA as a graduate school surprised us indeed. It has been an excellent model of an enterprise in which Armenia and Diaspora have collaborated without major conflicts."

An even more meaningful grade may be found in the assessment of alumnus Ghukasian, the banker.

"I was lucky to receive a good offer for work immediately after graduation," the Byblos CEO says. "So in the true meaning of these words, my AUA experience and education helped me get a chance." ■

To establish/add to an AUA Endowment: AGBU, 55 East 59th Street, New York, NY 10022. (www.agbu.org).

To donate toward scholarships: AUAC, 300 Lakeside Drive, 7th Floor, Oakland, CA 94612. (www.auac.net).