

What Does It Bring to the Existing System of Education in Armenia?

BY ANAHIT ORDIAN

The American University of Armenia (AUA) is only one of the many projects sponsored by the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) in Armenia. While recognizing the importance of humanitarian aid, the AGBU believes that investing in education and promoting new ideas will have a longer-lasting impact, and will bring about long-term positive changes.

For all its good traditions in science and teaching, the educational system of Armenia was not free of the flaws inherent in the Soviet social-economic system. AUA, as a university in the American mold, is introducing certain changes to the Armenian educational system. Here I shall describe some of these changes and try to show how they are affecting attitudes and academic performance among students at AUA.

■ **The GPA (grade point average) requirement to qualify for a degree.** There is no such requirement at other institutions of higher education in Armenia. Under the Soviet regime, there was an emphasis on carrying out established plans; once a quota was set, there was pressure to graduate a certain number of students regardless of standards of accomplishment, quality, or performance. AUA puts a greater emphasis on the quality of future specialists, than on their number.

As in the Soviet universities, so in the present-day universities of independent states, students who fail an exam are given several chances to retake it. In addition, the widely existing practice of favoritism allows poor students in most cases to get a passing grade. In the past, this meant that students with poor preparation had the same opportunities for employment as those with better qualifications. This seriously undermined the importance students attached to learning and excellence in studies. Students did not consider education an important factor in qualifying for a job; what mattered most was good contacts and well-positioned relatives. Now that the economic structure is changing, students with poor preparation are finding it more difficult to get good jobs.

In contrast, students at AUA must have a cumulative GPA of 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale) or above in order to get a diploma and be qualified as a specialist.

■ **Competitiveness and challenge.** As in almost all spheres of life under the Soviet regime, the educational system did not promote much competitiveness. People were not encouraged to develop a lot of enthusiasm and individual initiative. Corruption and favoritism within the educational system did not encourage hard work and creativity. In a Soviet university, it was not uncommon for a professor's

superior to exercise influence in the matter of grading. The administration at AUA does not interfere in the process of student evaluation by professors. In addition, the fact that almost all tests at AUA are written acts as a deterrent to subjective judgment, whereas in oral exams, there is a great deal of latitude in evaluating a student's performance. A more objective system of evaluation gives students greater incentive for academic achievement.

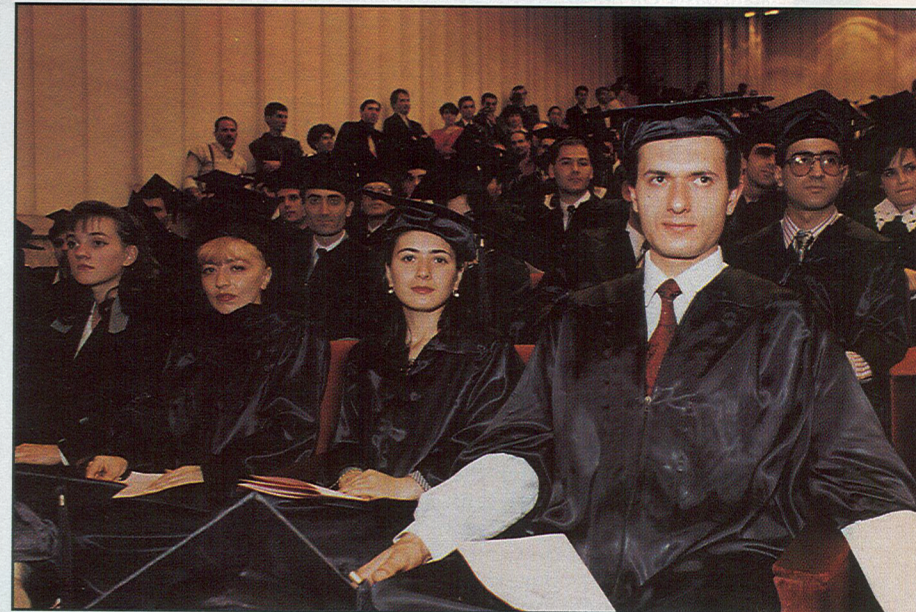
■ **Development of a sense of self-reliance in students.** American professors often complain that students at AUA cheat. However, the meaning of the word cheating is different for the two cultures; what is perceived as cheating by Americans is considered cooperation by people in the post-Soviet republics. The community-oriented and supportive Soviet culture did not implant in the youth the spirit of independence and self-reliance. The positive aspect of such a community-oriented society was that it encouraged group effort toward a goal, but it did not develop a sense of pride in independent problem solving. It will certainly take time for students at AUA to acclimatize themselves to the new rules of the game. The atmosphere of competitiveness at AUA is changing students' attitudes slowly but surely. Combined with their ingrained sense of cooperation, this will enable the students to attain higher levels of achievement.

■ **The value of time.** The value attached to time is in some ways reflected in the American system of education and testing. The GMAT (graduate management admissions test) and the GRE (graduate record exam) are real challenges for Armenian students, in that they must not only display their knowledge, but do so in a very limited time. Some Armenians would argue that the socialist system of education is more humane and fair; that one cannot always do one's best in a short time under pressure, and that the American system does not fairly evaluate the real level of knowledge. The reality is that due to the lack of competitiveness time was not and still is not of importance to students and for people in general in Armenia. Slowly, however, they are learning that time is money.

■ **Midterm exams.** Only recently has the practice of midterm exams been accepted in some universities of Armenia. The two major exam periods (January and June), with lack of challenging requirements during the rest of the term, did not force students to be active in their studies. As a result, students would leave most of their studying to the end of the semester and try to digest huge volumes in a few nights. Students at AUA like the practice of midterm exams, which increases the overall effectiveness of the learning process by focusing on small portions of

the whole. It also keeps them extremely busy during the whole academic year.

■ **Broader range of grades in evaluation.** The twelve-grade scale (A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D, D-, F) instead of the Soviet system of four grades (5,4,3,2) takes into account finer distinctions in student performance. Students find this



system of evaluation more rewarding, because it is an accurate measure of their effort.

■ **Feedback to professors from students.** Another feature of the totalitarian regime in the Soviet system of education was disregard of students' feedback on the professors' work. The regular practice of evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the course by students at AUA helps the administration to better understand their needs and problems, and apply more effective methods of teaching. Filling out evaluation forms is an entirely new phenomenon for Armenian students. It makes them feel important, and a part of the decision making process.

■ **Professor-student relationship.** The command system of the former Soviet Union had a direct influence on the professor-student relationship, not encouraging inter-action or giving students an active role in the class. Students at AUA are pleasantly surprised at the informal attitude of professors and at being treated respectfully by them.

■ **Instilling in students a sense of responsibility for their career.** American universities consider career placement an important part of their activities. AUA teaches the skills of writing good resumes, promoting oneself, getting interviews, and so forth. Under the old system, people had no conception of putting themselves forward; there was no job market as such, and therefore people did

not think in terms of making their skills known. Students at AUA are gradually learning to take responsibility for their own careers.

These features of education are usually taken for granted by Americans, but they are highly valued by students in post-command economy systems, who find new avenues for achieving life goals. Building a new, independent society requires developing market economy structures and establishing a democratic political system, as well as making changes in peoples' attitudes and approaches. AUA is making its unique contribution toward achieving these goals.

Anahit Ordian was among the first MBA graduates of the American University of Armenia. She received her Diploma in Labor Economics in 1979 from the Yerevan Institute of National Economy. She also received a Candidate of Science degree from the Institute after defending her dissertation in Human Resource Management in 1985. She is the author of several articles on work-force utilization.

With the collapse of the centrally planned economic system, she faced the challenge of advancing her knowledge in a free market economy system. While teaching Labor Economics at the Yerevan Institute of National Economy, she decided to become a student at AUA in order to study the Western system of management. The knowledge and improved computer and language skills she attained at AUA enabled her to win a research scholarship in 1993 at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. Upon returning to Armenia she worked at AUA as Assistant to the Director of Administration, and worked closely with the University's human resource management team.

In 1995 she was granted a Fulbright scholarship to conduct research on U.S. labor movements and labor law at the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Through her current research she intends to contribute to the process of human resource development in Armenia.

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