

# Learning Curve

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**I**n late 1980s, when the USSR was in its death throes, an unusual struggle against the Soviet regime hit many schools in Armenia. The bright red ties of the Young Pioneers were thrown away, as were the Little Octobrist badges and the Communist Youth Organization banners.

But, despite apparent enthusiasm for reform and formal innovations, the education system underwent no real changes and the content of both the curricula and textbooks remained the same. The social and economic crisis produced a decline in educational standards, as in all other walks of life.

"The educational system was rejected, instead of being improved," says Narine Hovhannisian, head of the General Education Department at the RA Ministry of Education and Science.

The official looks back fondly on the system that produced her and other present leadership.

"There was definitely no talk about standards of living or social issues in those days. Neither the principals nor the teachers worried about finding chalk or chairs," says Hovhannisian. "There was a clear curriculum, there were teachers, pupils and textbooks and life itself was orderly. Everyone's life would follow the same path: school-university-workplace and so on."

As in other facets of post-independence life in Armenia, nostalgia for an educational system that worked clouds contemporary perspective. Remembered now as a "flawless" institution with a clear curricula, it is forgotten by some that the very system now praised was also a system of propaganda that taught red-scarved tykes to love "Uncle Joe" (Stalin) or "Grandfather Lenin".

Everything changed drastically after independence. The Communist propaganda was tossed out, but so was emphasis on language, on classical literature, etc. And teachers, who once had no concern about income, were replaced by many who now take bribes for grades in order to compensate low salaries.

"There have been 11 ministers of education and science during 15 years of independence," says government expert Albert Ananian. "These figures show the confusion in the education system in Armenia."

Although Communist ideology was dismissed from the curriculum, there appeared no ready answers to many of the problems facing the education system.

"Schools remained the same, but the times changed and it was unclear what social system it was operating for," says Ashot Bleyan, former Minister of Education and Science and now head of the "Mkhitar Sebastatsi" education center with more than 2,000 pupils.

Ananian, from the Ministry of Education and Science, recalls that the enthusiasm for change in Armenia was expected to touch the education system first. But many factors got in the way.

The fully state-financed schools changed from light, comfortable and warm classrooms to the cold and frosty environments experienced during the energy crisis. The bright electric light was replaced by the smoking oil lamp.

"The lack of heating in classrooms and the low level of teachers' salaries that left them unable to cover even minimum living expenses affected the quality of education," says Hovhannisian.

Hamlet Nahatakian, a teacher with 45 years' experience, says the difficulties of those years affected the very image of the pedagogue, so highly esteemed in Soviet times.

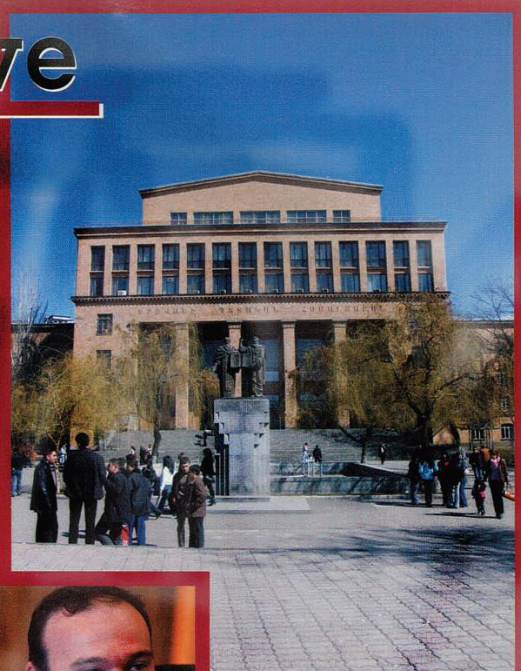
"The teacher's salary was so small that it was impossible to provide for basic needs," he recalls. "The situation drove many teachers deliberately to lower the quality of teaching in order to make pupils take special classes for a fee. Roughly speaking, the school moved to the teachers' homes."

According to Nahatakian, the rest of the teachers sought other ways of earning a living through supplemental jobs.

"If a pupil sees a teacher selling things in a market or a fair, the child will naturally change his attitude towards the educator; the same is with the teacher's attitude toward his own work," says the educator. "Children would neither trust nor respect teachers any more and the quality of education couldn't remain unaffected."

The lowering of quality prompted a boom in the tutoring business. Senior classes at school became phantom structures and pupils attended tutorials instead to prepare themselves for university entrance exams.

Despite the continuing state supervision of education, parents in the majority of schools "unofficially" paid for heating, chalk, textbooks, tuition and a favorable



Yerevan State's enrollment has jumped from 6,000 to 13,000.

Levon Mkrtchian is the 11th Minister of Education in 15 years.



still it was too little to produce a system comparable to international standards.

"The idea of paying for education reforms by means of long-term loans arose with an understanding of the state's financial incapacity. The first loan was given to encourage a change in financial and economic management. The second project aims to improve the content of education and its implementation is due with a transfer from World Bank," says Ananian. After 40 years the government of Armenia will be obliged to repay any loans it takes via the World Bank program.

The government approved the new system of education in 2004, amid claims in some circles that curricula were being imposed from abroad and did not correspond to the national mentality.

Just this year, for example, Armenia initiated a 12-grade school program, replacing the 10-year program of the past. To get it started required establishing two levels of first-graders—one for those 5-1/2 to 6 years of age and one for ages 6-1/2 to 7 years. The startup was met with resentment by parents who were convinced that their younger ones were too little to face the demands of daily school. And it was met by confusion from those who didn't understand where their children fit.

The result was that, on September 1, about a tenth as many first-graders enrolled as were expected—kept home by parents apparently waiting for clarification.

Norayr Chukasian, Director at the National Institute of Education (NIE), argues that any educational innovation requires long-term study, including foreign method-

## Education system changes with the times, but faces challenges

attitude towards their children from the teachers.

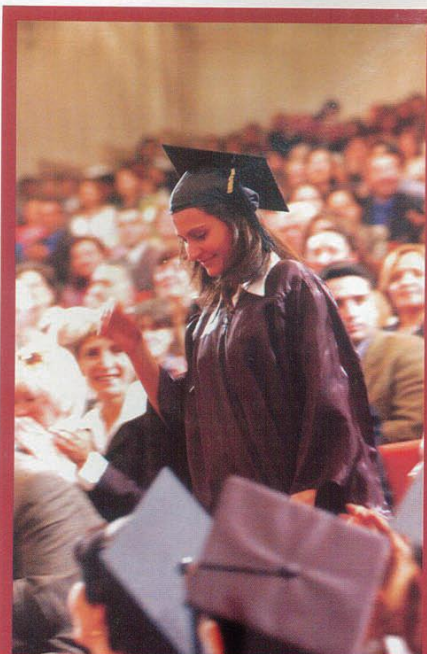
A new layer of society also emerged in Armenia, where officially more than the half of the population is poor. Many children dropped out of the education system due to family poverty—either skipping school to earn or beg for money, or simply not going at all.

The first beggar/illiterate children appeared in the streets of the newly independent Armenia.

### Reforms and grant projects

**T**he first steps in reform were initiated only a decade after the Soviet-style stagnation and decline. State allocations to education grew annually, but





Over 1,500 graduates have received Master's degrees at AUA.

ology. The outcome should be something that is acceptable abroad and corresponds to the Armenian outlook.

"We never copy foreign experience. Of course there are problems that need to be taken into account, but we don't need to make discoveries every time," he says.

Ananian believes lasting traditions in education are created by combining tried and tested methods with viable new ideas, and not simply by destroying existing ones.

First and foremost, say experts, healthy continuity also requires teachers to adapt to the new way of life and new thinking. Changes were made concerning the quality of teachers, resulting in thousands being made redundant.

"There might have been some shortcomings, but the teachers removed from the system were either pensioners or low-level specialists. The job cuts provided those who were left with more working hours and an increase in salaries. This also positively influenced the quality of education," says Hovhannissian.

State statistics show that the number of registered teachers in the nearly 1,400 general schools in Armenia stood at 44,097 in 2004, compared to 56,061 in 2000. The reduction in numbers was accompanied by simultaneous retraining of teachers at special centers.

Teachers have also benefited financially by the change from communism. In Soviet times, a teacher's salary was about \$25-40 per month; now, salaries range from about \$100-130.

New textbooks were another part of the reforms.

"Despite their novelty and attractiveness, the first publications of new textbooks were of much lower quality in terms of content and literacy than those printed in Soviet times," says Laura Harutyunian, a mother of three schoolchildren. "The math problems in elementary school books were incomprehensible even for the teachers and the grammatical errors were unfit for a textbook."

"There were many complaints by both parents and teachers about the new textbooks, but that's natural. If a

teacher has been working with a certain textbook for decades and it is replaced with a new one all of a sudden, then the response will naturally be negative. All that is still a matter of time," says Ghukasian.

Ghukasian says new Armenian textbooks will replace the remaining Soviet-era books by 2009.

"Big changes are ahead in the education sphere," he says. "New textbooks for Armenian grammar, mathematics, and other subjects will appear soon. The reforms will tangibly change the level of education in Armenia."

### New system, new hopes

To eradicate corruption in schools, the Education Ministry has opened a hotline. Bagrat Yesayan, Deputy Minister, says the hotline will give the government an opportunity to understand the situation, based on complaints from parents, and to offer the best solutions.

Besides the hotline, the new system also inspires hopes for fighting corruption.

Education experts claim that the introduction of 12-year schooling in place of a 10-grade system is a major improvement. Under the "Quality and Conformity in Education" International Credit Accord, the government was obligated to approve a program requiring parents to take children to school at age six. Before, children attended from age seven.

"We have been included in the international system of education, but this doesn't mean the move was dictated by participation in international processes," says Yesayan. "The aim of these reforms is to make education more accessible and to assure its quality."

Armenian experts in education claim the 12-year schooling system is a salvation.

"We need to catch up with the world," says education head Hovhannissian. "Our system of education does not comply with international criteria. Because of this, our pupils confront numerous problems abroad."

### Catching up with the African countries...

Minister of Education and Science Levon Mkrtchian acknowledges that raising educational standards to a proper level requires a lot of effort and time.

"We used to compare ourselves with European countries. But today we can compare ourselves to the countries of Central Asia. Now we stand close to Turkey and the system in that country is becoming a criterion for us. This means we need serious consistent work," he says.

The NIE's Ghukasian supports the Minister's position.

"We participated in the international TIMSS competition in mathematics for school children in 2003 for the first time. There were 53 countries represented in the survey and Armenia took 38th place. We were ahead only of the African states; the rest of the developing countries were better than us," says Ghukasian.

Ghukasian believes the reformed system of education will produce a real difference in quality. But the former minister Bleyan is sure that this will only be possible if the attitude of teachers changes towards children and education. He says that, over the years, children have come to see school attendance as a chore, rather than opportunity.

"Children should want to go to school every morning," he says. "For children, school remains an unattractive institution that is somehow disconnected to society and life, where there is no place for creativity."

Bleyan believes that reorganization of education and fine words calling for goodwill are insufficient. He says

that reforms must aim to have a direct impact on the content of education and its relationship with social trends.

### New education, new results

Despite the energy crisis and the decline in the quality of education immediately after independence, the number of applicants to universities underwent no significant change. But evolving social changes soon brought new admission policies.

Now independence has seen dramatic growth in the number of students applying to Armenia's major university, Yerevan State. In Soviet times, YSU had 6-7,000 students per year; now, with new admission policies, it has about 13,000. The number of its departments also grew—from 15 to 21. And the additional departments like theology, international studies, and sociology, also reflect the changes to an open society.

Private universities sprang up in response to growing demand for higher education in the mid-1990s. Official statistics say that 84 of the 100 universities in the republic were private by 1998-1999, when none existed in 1990. Various curricula, teaching methods and degrees were used to attract applicants.

Besides the diversity of universities, there were also a number of programs in Armenia offering high school pupils and university graduates the opportunity to continue their education and upgrade qualifications abroad.

The Edmund Muskie Scholarship Program, for example, which was started in 1995, enables university graduates to continue their education in the US.

Makrita Avjian, International Research and Exchange Council (IREX) Program Coordinator, says more than 300 young people have studied in the US within the framework of US State Department Educational and Cultural Department projects.

When the American University of Armenia (AUA) opened its doors on September 21, 1991—the national Day of Independence—to just 101 graduates of Armenian universities, it had many problems to solve. Today, the results of a system of education that is qualitatively different from others in Armenia are obvious everywhere.

AUA, which operates with support from the Armenian General Benevolent Union as well as a number of private and government grants, runs Master's degree programs and has had over 1,500 graduates in its 15 years. The majority has gone on to occupy key positions across Armenia.

"Education at AUA is quite intensive, which is the reason for the large volume of skills you gain there. The environment is more mature and independent, and one is given every opportunity for self-education," says Aramazd Ghalamkarian, an AUA graduate and PR Coordinator for the United Nations Developmental Program's Yerevan office.

Ghalamkarian says the Master's qualification and exposure to Western educational standards is what makes AUA graduates competitive both in the Armenian and international markets, which is key to helping Armenia to engage with the world.

"The university represents a new philosophy in higher education, with the student given a central role; it provides opportunity of choice and alternative methods of education," says Harutune Armenian, president of AUA.

The university that offers new solutions and a new way of thinking to its students goes forward by forming the present and future of independent Armenia and leads the way for other universities to overcome the post-Soviet crisis of curricula.

The "new style" of university has earned a reputation for quality and, significantly, for its ethics.

"I truly believe AUA is the only university that is not corrupt," says Christine Bessalian, a former English teacher at a major private university in Yerevan. "A student has to have high qualifications to enter. I have worked in the private sector, and I have seen what you have to do (meaning bribery) in order to have success in those places."