

Higher Education in Armenia Today: a focused review

Report for the Open Society Foundation Armenia

**CEU Higher Education Observatory
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The Higher Education Observatory is an initiative at Central European University (CEU), Budapest promoting applied policy research in higher education worldwide. The Observatory places a particular focus on applied studies regarding the relationship between higher education policies and practices, and issues of democratic developments. Specific research projects are carried out by CEU faculty members, researchers, and graduate students in cooperation with higher education experts from other universities and organizations.

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings and conclusions of an independent review of higher education in Armenia. The review was commissioned by the Open Society Foundation Armenia (hereinafter “OSFA”, or the “Foundation”). It was conducted between December 2012 and July 2013, and included all types of higher education institutions operating in Armenia: public, private, and intergovernmental/international.

This was a focused review. It specifically looked at the course of reforms since Armenia has joined the Bologna process in 2005 and at the relationship between higher education and the development of an open society.

Based on the results of the review, recommendations are put forward primarily in order to facilitate OSFA’s reflection on its future strategy and activities in this area. The review’s findings and recommendations, however, may be of interest to other stakeholders as well, beyond OSFA.

Context of the review

For about two decades OSFA has invested significant financial resources and efforts to support reforming higher education in post-soviet Armenia. In turn, OSFA expected that these reforms would contribute to promoting an overall democratic course of development in the country, in accordance with the values of the open society, which are at the core of the OSFA’s mission. More recently, OSFA placed a major focus on supporting the Bologna reforms in Armenian higher education, and in particular the quality assurance sub-set of these reforms. OSFA and other actors in Armenia perceived quality assurance as a key to unlocking the reform potential for the entire higher education system.

In 2012 the Foundation decided to conduct a re-evaluation of its strategy and activities in this area, supported by an external, focused review of Armenian higher education. This decision was informed primarily by a sense, shared by the executive leadership and the Board of the Foundation, that the direction of the developments in higher education was not encouraging. The perception was one of unremitting regress, rather than progress, with a negative impact on the society as a whole. As it was reflecting on a new strategy to positively influence the reforms, the Foundation asked itself questions about the ongoing developments in Armenian higher education and about the impact of its own work to date.

OSFA has demonstrated an extended knowledge about higher education in Armenia and was able to provide its own analysis and answers to address this situation. However, rather than taking for granted its own findings and envisaged solutions, the Foundation invited the CEU Higher Education Observatory to conduct an independent, external review. ***The review has confirmed some of the OSFA’s own positions, helped to refine a few others, and, in a number of instances, provided different insights and interpretations.***

Main findings and conclusions

The main findings and conclusions of the review that are detailed in the present report can be summarized as follows:

1. ***Armenia is an extraordinary reservoir of talent in the area of higher education.***
This is proven, among others, by the number of students - but also academics and other professionals - who leave the country year after year and make excellent careers abroad. Sadly, it appears that the prospects for this remarkable pool of talent to realize themselves at home are limited. Significant reforms would be needed, within and outside higher education, to address this situation.
2. ***Despite the dominant reform rhetoric, the Armenian higher education is not on a genuine reform path.*** Instead, the higher education system is locked in a situation characterized by:
 - ***exaggerated control grip by the political regime¹;***
 - ***lack of an authentic program of reforms;***
 - ***pervasive corruption;***
 - ***continuously decreasing quality standards;*** and
 - ***massive emigration of young talent.***
3. ***The degree of support for the idea of a comprehensive reform program along the Bologna lines and for the “Bologna model” is low*** among a majority of the stakeholders and the general public. Many in the country, within the higher education system itself and external stakeholders, are inclined to support the idea of a ***return to the Soviet model*** in higher education, pointing to allegedly higher quality standards in the Soviet times. The proportion of those committed to and working to promote the Bologna model and Bologna reforms is low. Their efforts are not insignificant but they represent a minority. In fact, one could rather talk of a large, although informal and unintended, ***“coalition of the unwilling”*** with regard to the reforms of higher education in Armenia. Members of this informal and unexpected coalition are not entirely or not genuinely committed to the official program of Bologna reforms, when not simply against. They include diverse and unlikely allies, such as representatives of the political regime, members of the university leadership and of the academic staff, students, parents, as well as part of the Armenian Diaspora that is active in the country. Moreover, it appears that while promoting actively the Bologna reforms, some of the international organizations active in Armenia in effect provide support to this coalition of the unwilling as well, without intending and possibly even without realizing it. While the motivations and intentions of the various actors in this informal coalition are different from case to case, their attitudes and actions converge, intentionally or not, in perpetuating the current situation, with the exaggerated control by the political regime, and the absence of an authentic reform horizon.

¹ By “political regime” in this report we refer basically to the current form of government in Armenia, understood in a neutral way and without implying a negative connotation.

4. ***Despite a rather difficult overall situation, there are important developments and resources in the system that could be mobilized to promote positive change.*** Such developments and resources often tend to pass unnoticed, are misrepresented, and occasionally suppressed. In fact, significant expertise and pressure for change has already accumulated within the system, generated to a large extent by the official program of reforms itself. They usually manifest in one-off initiatives, often by isolated individuals and organizations. Some of these individuals are highly qualified and genuinely committed to professional performance and also to public action in favor of the reform. They work mainly in universities, but also in NGOs and, importantly, in government agencies and structures as well.
5. ***The Foundation alone does not have the technical and financial resources to single-handedly transform or change the higher education system.*** It remains, however, uniquely placed to promote steps that may support crucial elements of a change process. ***OSFA is one of the very few organizations which have both the flexibility and the strategic resources to help make a difference with regard to the reform of higher education in Armenia, in a direction consistent with the values of an open society. The Foundation, however, could not be successful if it acted alone or in isolation.***
6. ***There is no one single action, aspect, lever, or key that the Foundation could “switch”, or focus on, to successfully change the direction of the evolutions in the Armenian higher education.*** This observation applies to quality assurance as well. Developments in quality assurance, currently the core component of the Bologna reforms in Armenia², have brought little progress, so far. As yet, there is only modest, or possibly no positive impact at all, on the academic instructors or students and on the learning environment. Much like the rest of the Bologna reforms, quality assurance remains subject to excessive control by the political regime, and to date it has generated mostly superficial, formal changes.
7. ***It can be reasonably expected that the present configuration, dynamics, and performance of the higher education system are likely to generate negative effects on the Armenian society - politically, economically, and socially - taking into account both short-term and long-term perspectives.*** This statement can be illustrated with many examples in various spheres, from political to moral, and from social to economic. Here are a few such examples:
- Armenia has a reservoir of bright and highly motivated students. Many of them, however, leave the country, in general never to return. Emigration of talent is a mass phenomenon with major negative consequences.
 - At present, the Armenian higher education appears to function as an overly controlled system, which slows down if not disables the change process.
 - The Armenian higher education system serves as a model for the larger Armenian society, sometimes with negative consequences, including from the perspective of open society values. This involves the acceptance of corruption

² Republic of Armenia. 2012. National Report regarding the Bologna Process Implementation 2009-2012.

as a “normal”, everyday practice; a certain disregard for merit and work-based performance; a pervasive sense of hopelessness regarding public engagement – and in particular regarding the use of open dialogue in public affairs.

- Given the nature of the educational model in Armenian higher education, most students are not adequately prepared for the professional life after graduation; many of them do not have the skills required by the Armenian economy, public service or other professional sectors.

The fate of the higher education reforms in Armenia is relevant beyond the higher education sector. Similarly, if not even more than in the case of other countries of the region, what is happening in Armenian higher education is influenced by and has an impact on the geopolitical situation, on the ongoing reconstruction of national identity, on some of the basic structures of the society, as well as on the national economy. **The future of Armenia depends sensibly on the fate of its higher education system.**

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the review we propose that OSFA consider adopting a **new strategic focus** and a **new operational approach** for its higher education strategy.

The new focus we recommend is ***to help create and protect the space for reform*** and ***help sustain a genuine reform direction***. The concepts of ***space for reform*** and ***reform direction*** as used in this report are detailed in the section III.1.j.

In terms of operational approach we propose that the Foundation ***move more energetically from trying to address existing issues itself to mobilizing and helping other actors to address them.***

Proposals for concrete action have been put forward under each of these headings.

II. METHODOLOGY

The research project was divided into four ***key phases***:

1. December 2012 - February 2013: background desk research; consultation with international experts.
2. February 2013: Preliminary field research; expert interviews; interviews with OSFA staff and Board members.
3. April 2013: main field research, over 70 extended interviews in Yerevan, Gyumri, Gavar and Vanadzor.
4. May-July 2013: data analysis and final report compilation.

Phase 1 included extended analysis of the official documents and reports by Armenian authorities and international organizations, scholarly articles, documents and reports of the OSFA. International higher education experts and students from Armenia

studying outside the country have been consulted informally to orient the review. The research team was limited to the literature that is available in English.

In *Phase 2*, a team of two researchers conducted preliminary in-depth interviews with a dozen Armenian higher education experts, as well as with OSFA staff and Board members to orient the study and identify key focus points.

During *Phase 3*, the research team including a senior researcher and higher education policy expert as well as two junior researchers interviewed approximately 70 individuals, separately or in groups, who are active in the higher education sector in various capacities in Yerevan, Gyumri, Vanadzor and Gavar. The sample included high, mid, and technical-level government officials (from the Ministry of Education and various affiliated agencies and programs), the Armenian National Agency for Quality Assurance (ANQA), the Bologna Secretariat, management representatives of six state, two private and three international universities in Yerevan³ (including rectors, vice rectors, chairs, heads, deans, and other university administrators), individual faculty members and students from state and private universities; two focus group meetings with 7-10 faculty members and another two with students in Yerevan. The research team also traveled outside Yerevan and met with university leaders and members of the management at state universities in Gyumri, Vanadzor and Gavar. In addition, faculty focus group meetings were held at Gyumri and Vanadzor and student focus groups in Vanadzor and Gavar. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with representatives of international organizations active in higher education in Armenia, including: TEMPUS, World Bank, DAAD, American Councils, IREX and Eurasia Foundation, as well as with representatives of individual projects funded by international organizations. One representative of the private sector was also interviewed.

Throughout the course of the research project, literature on higher education, especially studies on Armenia have been closely analyzed, including a comprehensive report by the World Bank “Addressing Governance at the Center of Higher Education Reforms in Armenia”⁴, which was published in early May 2013.

III. MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Extensive background research and a large number of in-depth interviews with experts and members of various groups of stakeholders of the Armenian higher education have provided considerable material for analysis. As in any higher education system, there are many important issues, which are complex and multifaceted. The aim of this

³State universities included: Yerevan State University, State Engineering University of Armenia, Armenian State Pedagogical University, Yerevan State Linguistic University, Yerevan State Medical University, Yerevan State University of Architecture and Construction. Private universities: Eurasia International University and Yerevan Gladzor University. Intergovernmental/international universities: American University of Armenia, Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University, La Fondation Université Française en Arménie (UFAR) – French University.

⁴ Report is available in English and Armenian on the website of the World Bank: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2013/01/17748657/addressing-governance-center-higher-education-reforms-armenia>

section of the report is to present a concise overview of what has been identified as most pressing and relevant for the higher education sector, in particular considering the mission, values and priorities of the Open Society Foundation.

III. 1. At system-level

III.1.a. The meaning and place of “Bologna”

What is simply referred to as “Bologna” in Armenia has become the focal point of the official program of higher education reforms since 2005. “Bologna” is both a complex and a simplistic concept in Armenia, as it is the case in other countries as well. As a conceptual reference for the reforms, it can mean several things at the same time, and in an intricate manner. Moreover, the meaning and relevance of Bologna differ across groups of stakeholders and occasionally even within given individual groups. The research helped to identify the following manifestations of “Bologna” in the Armenian context:

- ***European integration mechanism.*** By joining the Bologna process in Bergen in 2005 and by making a commitment to become a part of the European Higher Education Area, Armenia sent an important message that it wished to be closer to Europe. Participating in the Bologna process provided Armenia with the possibility to join a political - not just higher education - space, which was an alternative to that of the former Soviet Union. Today, cooperation and integration with the European Union and its structures is still mentioned as the key direction for the country’s foreign policy. The Bologna Process is seen as a proxy for European integration and, as such, it has a high normative connotation. As a result, the government is extremely sensitive to its international image, as seen in relation to the Bologna reforms, particularly now that Armenia chairs the Bologna Secretariat for the entire European Higher Education Area (47 countries) until 2015.
- ***The “only” reform model.*** “Bologna” represents the official reform program in Armenian higher education. Moreover, even individuals and organizations that are critical of what they see as the government’s recuperation of the Bologna discourse, and assess that the Bologna reforms have brought only limited positive changes, if at all, stated consistently in interviews that there could be no alternative direction, and that Bologna must remain the only model and reference for the reforms in higher education. Bologna, the reformists say, must remain **the model** even in spite of the currently disappointing reality of its implementation.
- ***An opportunity to access financial resources.*** The Bologna process and its intended result, the creation of a European Higher Education Area, have been a source of inspiration for Armenia, offering a model, or models in higher education. For example, Armenia has adopted the Bologna degree structure, the Bologna-recommended model of academic credits (ECTS), the guidelines and

standards for the organization of quality assurance, or the Bologna-inspired academic mobility discourse and practices. At the same time, the Bologna process has also served as an important opportunity for attracting significant *financial resources*, coming not only from Europe, but mainly and principally offered under the heading of support for the Bologna reforms.

- *A political tool to be used at national, regional, and international level.* The Bologna process and reforms also served as *a source of political legitimacy*, both internally and internationally. The interest of the government in the Bologna process, including on its political dimension, is reflected in the decision to apply for hosting the Bologna Secretariat for the period until 2015. This is a major endeavor, of European as well as regional relevance, involving significant resources (financial, professional, and administrative) to be mobilized at national level, as well as a clear political commitment. At present, the Bologna Secretariat hosted by Armenia appears to be very well resourced and organized, with highly qualified staff members. Hosting the Bologna Secretariat is a significant opportunity for the country, including in terms of promoting the Bologna reforms.
- *A window to the world.* For many in Armenia, even from among those who do not genuinely believe in the Bologna inspired-reforms, joining the European Higher Education Area brings about at least one clear advantage: the Armenian higher education (the Armenian students in particular) can benefit, at least theoretically, from a window to the world, relatively stable and friendly. This is no minor advantage, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which also used to offer a window to a larger space, now largely disintegrated. The European Higher Education Area replaces and significantly enlarges this former space, helping to avoid that Armenia remains isolated, and its students, first and foremost, remain by default locked inside the country.
- *An instrument for building a new identity.* The early promoters of the Bologna reforms in Armenia were a small group of academics and university administrators. For them, joining the Bologna process was an opportunity to build a new national identity in Armenia, by voluntarily replacing the Soviet reference with the European one. The new national identity, involving markedly European elements, was to be partly mediated by a radical transformation of higher education. The link between Bologna and the construction of a European identity remains on the agenda until today, shared somewhat ambivalently by various actors, including the political regime. This idea is challenged at times, although informally and not openly, primarily by certain individual students, academics, and parents, who would prefer to see a return to the Soviet model. They express that such a return would be a reasonable and effective solution in response to the alleged continuing degrading of the quality of higher education after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They also allege that the Soviet model in higher education was a superior one.

There are other interesting aspects of the identity-building dimension of Bologna that emerged in the interviews. A representative of the Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University, a Russian-speaking university funded by Moscow and

operating in Yerevan, stated that in order to be competitive in Armenia this university needs to assert itself as sufficiently “Armenian”. In turn, in order to achieve this objective the Slavonic University opted to join the Bologna model and the Bologna reforms. In other words, in this case *becoming Armenian* meant, in some sense, *becoming European*, or following the European model.

It can be stated that, for better or worse, the Bologna process and Bologna-inspired reforms hold a central place in the Armenian higher education, and also in the current Armenian politics.

III.1.b Prevailing perception regarding the current state of the Bologna reforms in Armenia: success or failure?

It is undeniable that many tangible changes have taken place in Armenia stimulated by the Bologna reforms. They include a new degree structure, new techniques and tools (like the European credit system – ECTS, or the diploma supplement), new regulatory developments at national level (like the adoption of the National Qualifications Framework), a new vocabulary and institutional structures for quality assurance (with the creation of the National Agency for Quality Assurance and of the quality assurance units at university level), etc. *The prevailing perception among those interviewed, however, corroborated with factual findings about the reality in universities, is that most of these changes are mainly structural and formal, with no real impact at the level of contents and substance. The Bologna reforms did not have a significant, let alone positive, impact on teaching and learning, on research, or on the contents and substance of administrative or governance practices. The Bologna reforms, therefore, were characterized by most people in the interviews, even by those openly in favor of the reforms, as being largely a failure.* Moreover, in some cases the impact appears to be negative. For example, despite the current emphasis on building a quality assurance system, it appears from the interviews that the overall impact on quality (expressed in the quality of processes in higher education or in the quality of the output) has been either neutral or negative.

The area of quality assurance is particularly important for the understanding of the history and the current state of the Bologna reforms in Armenian higher education. For the purpose of the present report, it is also important to understand and detail how the reforms in this area are perceived by the main stakeholders, including by OSFA.

At present, the official focus of the Bologna reforms is on the construction of a new quality assurance system and its implementation⁵. This is a complex sub-set of reforms which includes the adoption of new national regulations and the creation of new institutional structures and procedures, at system and institutional levels. The institutional

⁵ See for example: Republic of Armenia. 2012. National Report regarding the Bologna Process Implementation 2009-2012.

accreditation program, currently underway, plays a particularly important role in this context.

Initially, a couple of universities in Armenia had begun voluntarily to implement changes inspired by the Bologna process already before 2005, such as introducing the two cycles, bachelor and master, along the lines of the original Bologna Declaration of 1999. After joining the Bologna process officially in 2005, higher education reforms intensified and the aim has been to make the Armenian system more compatible with the European models. The increased focus on the importance of the integration of the Armenian higher education into the European structures, along with the political environment then open to changes, had motivated international organizations and Armenian NGOs, including OSFA, to support the reforms and contribute to a series of Bologna-inspired projects and initiatives. Such organizations were faced with the question of **choosing a focus** that would be most useful in their efforts to promote the reform program. In recent years, the Foundation, similarly to other actors, chose **quality** in higher education as the focus of its strategy and launched projects on institutional quality assurance. The concern for **quality** very soon translated into a concern and support for **quality assurance mechanisms**. Institutional quality assurance systems and mechanisms were considered the key for ensuring transformational changes. This assumption was a logical one and it was also shared by the national policy makers, for whom a top priority became the development of the Armenian National Quality Assurance Agency (ANQA), established in 2008. Important international actors such as the World Bank⁶ (through a large, dedicated loan) or the TEMPUS Program of the EU, have also supported the focus on quality assurance and gave priority to efforts in this area⁷. This convergence of focus on quality assurance at system level translated into action at institutional level as well. In fact, projects on quality assurance were so prevalent that one of the higher education experts interviewed for this research indicated that he alone participated in over 15 different projects in this area since 2008, funded from different national and international sources.

It appears that, consistent with the overall fate of the Bologna reforms, the impact of these sub-reforms and of the new approaches to **quality assurance** on the actual **quality** of higher education appears to be unimpressive. The perception of the situation varies among the stakeholders. The government considers it will work well in the end, while acknowledging that more work - and time - is needed. International organizations are somewhat more critical, but are not going so far as to declare it a failure, and plan to continue their support. Our own assessment is based on extended interviews with faculty, university administrators, students, and some external stakeholders (government, NGO and business representatives). The conclusion is that the overall impact of the quality assurance reforms has not been significant and positive, certainly not to date. The only clearly positive element we have been able to identify is the spread of a new vocabulary

⁶Saroyan, A. 2008. Quality Assurance in Higher Education in The Republic of Armenia: Analysis and Recommendations. Yerevan: World Bank. Also, cf. ANQA. 2013. Armenian Quality Assurance Technical Assistance Project. <http://www.anqa.am/argata/>

⁷ NTO. 2013. Tempus Projects.

http://www.tempus.am/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1257&Itemid=605&lang=en

(international/European) and discourse on quality assurance, sometimes supported by new formal structures at national and institutional level. These developments, however, are not translated into improvements of the quality of learning, or of the educational environment in general. While it can be argued that this is a matter of time (it is perhaps too early for these reforms to deliver results), we recognize the same pattern as in the case of the other waves of Bologna reforms: quality assurance changes are too strictly controlled, centrally-designed and implemented; no open dialogue or consultation took place among relevant stakeholders, that would help to identify, state publicly and correct shortcomings of this intended sub-set of reforms. The major problem appears not to be professional (lack of professional expertise in the area of quality assurance), but policy/political. To give just a few examples corroborated from interviews regarding exaggerated political intervention in the quality assurance reform process: the Prime Minister is the chair of the Board of the national agency for quality assurance (ANQA) and in this capacity intervenes directly in the work of the organization; the Prime Minister and the President influence and can directly decide on the funding, set-up and operations of the large World Bank-supported program in the area of quality assurance.

Another problem is bureaucracy. The reforms of quality assurance are designed and carried out bureaucratically and top-down, and are therefore met with distrust if not open opposition by most faculty and students. Moreover, the strictly top-down and bureaucratic nature of the process, the absence of open dialogue and consultation, make it very difficult for those who have to put the reform in practice to understand what the process is actually supposed to be about. To illustrate the situation with regard to the implementation of the quality assurance reforms, one faculty member mentioned that the administrative secretary to the department chair is the one who runs and is the go-to person on the quality assurance. She communicates with faculty members by telephone or rather by sending text messages to assign urgent “quality assurance” tasks. In five years, there has not been even one single faculty meeting to inform members of the department about the plans in quality assurance, let alone to consult them.

While many individuals in the higher education system, in particular administrators and faculty members, do have a clear sense that the current focus of the Bologna reforms in Armenia is on quality assurance, they remain skeptical as to whether this sub-set of reforms would produce any better results than other aspects of the overall reform efforts.

As it will be detailed in a separate section (III.1.e) below, the prevailing understanding of the Bologna reforms among students and academics is a narrow, skewed one, focusing on a few, selected technical aspects, some of them of no real or only marginal relevance to the reform program. ***The lack of information regarding the Bologna process and understanding of the Bologna reforms in Armenia is salient.*** At the same time, Bologna reforms are perceived by many in the system as a bureaucratic and top-down exercise of importing from abroad through a kind of automatic copy-paste. The result is that there is ***very limited sense of ownership of the Bologna reforms in the system. This fact, in turn, influences significantly the likelihood of the reforms to succeed.*** The main stakeholders in higher education do not perceive the Bologna reform

program as their program, even when they support the idea of reforms along the Bologna lines. Rather, the perception is one of a reform program which, in its planning and actual manifestation, is decided upon by the political regime, without any real possibility for open consultation or participation in the calibration and adjustments of the actual policies, measures, or tools that operationalize the reform program. This is perceived by many stakeholders in higher education as a restrictive model of policy making, which may represent a negative model for policy making in general in Armenia.

III.1.c. Exaggerated control of the political regime in higher education

A few important issues begin to surface immediately in almost any discussion with stakeholders in the Armenian higher education. Perhaps the most striking among these is the perception of an overwhelming level of state involvement and the pervasiveness of the political control mechanisms at all levels of the higher education system. The interest of the Armenian political regime in higher education is remarkable and this could theoretically lead to positive developments. Unfortunately, it appears that this interest is manifested in too much desire to control. It also appears difficult for the Bologna reforms to be effectively implemented given an imbalanced structure of power and the too strong grip of the political regime on the higher education system. The Bologna process has been conceived in and for democratic societies, and it involves as a necessary (although possibly not sufficient) condition for its success such interactions among the main stakeholders in a given higher education system that are governed by the principle of balance of powers, with the respect of university autonomy and academic freedom.

The over-consolidation of *the regime's control in the higher education* sector can be illustrated by numerous examples:

- Each state higher education institution has a member of the government (including the president, the head of the presidential administration, the chairman of the national assembly, the prime minister, or the minister of education) as chair of their academic councils. The academic councils, in turn, are key decision-making bodies in universities. The level of influence representatives of the political regime can exercise in this role may vary, but the setup itself hinders institutional autonomy, effective university leadership and management. Recently, the World Bank criticized this reality and compiled the full list of government officials chairing university councils. (*See the table adopted from the World Bank below.*)
- High-level government officials are also members of the governing boards of the national quality assurance agency (ANQA), as well as some international universities, which supposedly have been guaranteed an autonomous status. For example, although ANQA adheres to the European Standards and Guidelines of Quality Assurance, which requires autonomy of the Agency from the government, the Prime Minister is the chair of the ANQA Board. In this capacity he participates directly to the deliberations and decisional process at ANQA, sometimes deciding

major changes of policies or direction. Moreover, there is a flagrant conflict of interest given that ANQA, chaired by the Prime Minister, is in the process of accrediting the Pedagogic State University, whose council chair is the Prime Minister himself. This situation would be easy to correct once the political will was there.

- Other aspects regarding the state control include legislative framework that is at the same time highly restrictive and too ambiguous. The legislation in effect today provides a separate regulation for nearly each aspect of university operations (with occasional contradictions between different documents and areas of regulation), from curriculum and academic program regulations to human resources management, and from student recruitment procedures to university budgets and financial management. At the same time, regulatory ambiguity is another factor that allows the state nominal control over the universities. The legislation on higher education is set out in a number of ambiguous and contradictory documents⁸. The main legislation on higher education is provided in the 1999 Law on Education and the 2004 Law on Higher and Post-Graduate Professional Education. However, the 2001 Law on State Non-Commercial Organisations and the 2001 Law on State Governing Institution also applies to universities, leaving considerable ambiguity about the relations between state and universities. The 2002 Charter of the Ministry of Education and Science, moreover, establishes that the state is nominally in control of universities. The legislation is currently under review, a process that is conducted in manner that is considered to be non-transparent, as indicated in many interviews with academics and university administrators.
- The state controls directly the budget of state universities, despite the fact that the proportion of state allocation is very limited. State universities receive only between about 9 and 30% of their budgets from the state; the rest of their funding comes from student tuition fees. ***Considering the sources of funding, Armenia is one of the most privatized higher education systems in the world, while its governance model remains state-control.*** As put by several people in the interviews, Armenian state universities are only “state” in that they are state-controlled, but they are not really state-funded.
- The political regime does not present itself and it is not perceived outside Armenia as a repressive one in higher education. The regime is keen on cooperating with international organizations, and has been able to develop a good relationship with the Armenian Diaspora.

⁸ World Bank. 2013. Addressing Governance at the Center of Higher Education Reforms in Armenia. Yerevan: World Bank. Page 9-10.
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2013/01/17748657/addressing-governance-center-higher-education-reforms-armenia>

TABLE ADOPTED FROM THE WORLD BANK REPORT: “Addressing Governance at the Center of Higher Education Reforms in Armenia”(p. 27)⁹

Examples of the Chairperson of the Council (Governing Board) of Prominent State HEIs

State HEIs	Chairperson of the Council
Yerevan State University	President of Armenia
Yerevan State Linguistic University	Head of the Presidential Administration
Armenian State University of Economics	Chairman of the National Assembly
State Pedagogical University	Prime Minister of Armenia
State Engineering University	Former Chairman of the National Assembly
State Agrarian University	Chairman of the Civil Servants Council
Yerevan State Medical University	Minister of Education and Science
State Conservatory	Former Armenian Ambassador to Russia
State Engineering and Construction University	Mayor of Yerevan
Armenian State Institute of Physical Culture	Head of the second largest political party represented in the Parliament
Goris State University	Governor of Syunik Marz

Sources: Official websites of the respective HEIs.

III.1.d. Lack of open public debate about higher education

Connected to the previous section regarding the excessive power grip, another area of concern emerging from the interviews is the deficit of open public debate about higher education and the reform process. In general, most higher education stakeholders are not accustomed to discussing publicly issues related to the higher education system, including concerns they may have privately, or ideas about how to contribute to the reforms. In fact, some of the interviewees had difficulty formulating their views at first, as they are typically not asked for their feedback on those important issues. Later, when asked to whom they could address their concerns or with whom to talk about the challenges they were facing in their day-to-day work in higher education, the ironic answer was “to/with ourselves”.

There are no fora for academics or other stakeholders to talk to each other openly and in a constructive manner about the state of higher education or even about their

⁹ Report is available in English and Armenian on the website of the World Bank: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2013/01/17748657/addressing-governance-center-higher-education-reforms-armenia>

current, daily business. Academics often choose a “self-censorship” mode even in informal settings, and they clearly tend to refrain from making statements in public, afraid of being reprimanded. Cases when university teachers did not have their contracts extended, allegedly after voicing concerns about education in public, have been mentioned as partial explanation for not speaking up.

Students also lack proper discussion platforms to express their views or raise questions and concerns, both within their own schools and universities and at a broader public level. There seems to have been progress in this regard recently, as it will be mentioned in the section on students, below. Students at a state university in Gavar seem to be privileged in this respect, as they are encouraged and can freely talk to the Rector who implemented an ‘open door’ policy. This appeared to be an exceptional case among all the institutions we visited.

One important aspect in this context is that despite the fact that students and their families pay up to 90% of the universities’ budgets, they have no idea about how this money is being spent. Even if some basic documents are available, these are not accessible for the wider public. Consequently, there can be no public debate on how the universities’ budgets should be allocated.

Even if students and academics complain about very basic problems like the lack of minimal infrastructure, they have no knowledge of or influence on how the university money is spent and their complaints or opinions are only rarely addressed by the university management.

This lack of open and free policy debate, the lack of possibility to contribute to one’s future in the university as a student, teacher, or administrator, and the excessive political control of the public policy discourse hinders the reform process. The voices that are crucial for the debate about higher education and its future in Armenia do not usually emerge in the public sphere and exist only in the ‘underground’, online fora. This situation also leads to societal tensions, which can be already sensed in the country.

III.1.e. Lack of information and understanding regarding the content of and context for reforms. Limited sense of ownership of the Bologna reforms

The overall purpose and the key concepts of the higher education reforms in Armenia and of the Bologna process more generally have not been well understood, especially among students and academics, not to mention the general public. “Bologna” is often understood through some minor aspects of the reforms. For example, students in one of the focus groups referred to “Bologna” as meaning nothing else but the new format of an examination sheet introduced recently in Armenia (which in fact has nothing to do with the Bologna process). They were not able to mention any other aspects that would define “Bologna”. This is an extreme example of a narrow perception and skewed understanding of what is otherwise a large and complex reform process. Many academics in interviews expressed their puzzlement regarding the concept of “learning outcome”, another key concept and tool recently ‘imported’ with the Bologna reforms. They questioned not only why learning outcomes were needed, but also simply what was meant by this concept. Such examples indicate that the Bologna process and its broader

context have not been well translated and internalized in the national context of higher education, or to put it more simply, well understood. The overall objectives of the reforms are not clear to most academics, students, and administrators. Rather, Bologna is seen by many as an attempt to introduce strictly technical elements, using a bureaucratic, top-down approach, as already discussed above in section III.1.b.

The “visible” elements, which define Bologna and the Bologna reforms for most people, include a set of tools and mechanisms such as the credit system, the three-cycle degree structure, or the templates used in the accreditation process. This view of the Bologna process could have developed in part because the emphasis of the policy makers was from the beginning placed on selected aspects of the reforms as opposed to a more comprehensive approach. Also, there has been no systematic and system-wide communication program regarding the Bologna reforms. Initiatives aiming at promoting a better understanding of the Bologna reforms existed (OSFA funded a few), but they remained isolated in terms of target audience and thematic scope.

Individuals who are otherwise well informed and also more critically-minded very often express that a problematic aspect is that the main elements of the Bologna reforms have been simply imported through “copy-paste”, without any effort to explain, adapt or make them relevant to the national context. Therefore, it is very unlikely that they will be accepted or that they would work. This is one of the most often proposed explanations both for the current low level of support for the Bologna reforms and for the unimpressive state of their implementation.

The lack of understanding of the Bologna reforms, together with the perception of an imposition from the top and lack of consideration for local realities and needs, results in *very limited sense of ownership in the system in general*.

Of particular interest in this context is the concept of *mobility*, as promoted by the Bologna process. Erasmus and other mobility opportunities are not well known in Armenia, they are not transparent or accessible to wider audiences in universities. Mobility, as a distinct dimension of the Bologna process, is not a public topic in Armenian higher education, despite being central to the overall process and despite the interest of many Armenians in studying abroad. *Several interviewees expressed the belief that the current low level of public support for the Bologna process would improve if people in the system, in particular students, would know in detail about and could take advantage of the existing mobility possibilities brought about by Bologna.*

III.1.f. The reforms remain formal and stuck at system level. They do not reach beyond the top and mid level of the university bureaucracy.

Many of the interviewees and basically all higher education experts expressed the view that although a lot has been done at the level of larger structural changes at system level, the actual implementation process “on the ground” has been much less successful and effective. In fact, very little has changed at core of the educational environment, and even less has changed for the better. There are strong views that the Bologna-inspired reforms have not reached the students and teachers and that the overall educational

environment has not changed because the reforms are stuck at system level and did not penetrate beyond the top and mid levels of the university bureaucracy.

The bureaucratic and top-down approach and the relatively rapid intended pace of reforms are indicated as other main reasons for poor reform outcomes. Some in fact view the changes as superficial, as “reforms on paper only”. The conversations with individual faculty members and students from various universities confirmed this perception. Academic staff members, who are not in management positions, often view the Bologna-inspired changes as an additional layer of bureaucracy and technicalities that are now required on top of their everyday teaching tasks; they include, for example, new requirements for more exams, more forms to fill out, etc. On the other hand, some students had knowledge about what Bologna reforms should bring into their higher education experience, but they noticed little change in practice. The bureaucratic nature of the reforms is also expressed in the fact that students and teachers are not involved in the reforms, except marginally, neither by virtue of their day-to-day professional work, nor in public policy fora. This result in the perception that “these are not our reforms”, but rather constitute some kind of external experience, bureaucratically imposed.

Taken together, the three characteristics described above – the lack of public discussion, the lack of understanding of the reform purpose, and the lack of involvement of students and teachers – appear to lead to significant lack of enthusiasm about changes in higher education, and lack of hope that something significant was about to change.

III.1.g. The place of international organizations

A particular characteristic of the Armenian higher education system is that there are many international organizations active on the ground. They all attempt to make a real contribution to the reform of higher education. Some of them are powerful and influential, some less so. They have different missions and different leverage regarding the reforms. Most of these organizations appear to refrain from publicly confronting the reality of the limited success to date of the Bologna reforms in Armenian higher education. In part this attitude is explained by the legal status and mandate of the respective organizations. For instance, both the World Bank and the EU institutions are bound by their legal obligations to cooperate with the government. Otherwise, they make very significant contributions, be it by providing resources and expertise (financial, professional), or a bridge to other parts of the world. The relative silence of international organizations in naming some of the main dysfunctional elements of the higher education reforms publicly, such as the excessive control grip of the political regime, most probably makes a disservice to the higher education system and to the country. International organizations, individually, in cooperation with each other and with the government, could contribute to put Armenian higher education on a genuine reform path. At present, some of their actions, although well intended, and in particular the relative public silence regarding the current situation, may contribute to the perpetuation of this situation. The

recent report of the World Bank quoted above appears to be a major step in this direction that needs to be supported by further commitment and initiatives.

III.1.h. Mass emigration

Only last year, the Minister of Education, Armen Ashotyan, reportedly told an audience of young scientists that ‘It would be preferable that you, a physicist with a bright future, go to Chicago or Boston and make a name for yourself. Afterwards, you will be in a better position to help Armenia through your contacts and grants, rather than staying and working as a laboratory assistant somewhere. Right now the government cannot guarantee the condition necessary for your career path’¹⁰. This gloomy statement, probably well-intended and not entirely devoid of truth, reflects the systematic problem of emigration of skilled labor.

Although it is hard to estimate migration flows, it is clear that Armenia has a serious problem with emigration. The World Bank’s official migration data show that between 2008 and 2012, 75.000 people left the country¹¹. But calculating the balance of people arriving and leaving the country by airplane, railroad or highway, shows a much higher number: around 42.800 people left the country in 2012 without returning¹²; this figure is down from a decade-high of 46.700 in 2010. A survey by the OSCE¹³ found that nearly one-fifth (18.8%) of the emigrants between 2002 and 2005 have a higher education degree. The same report also estimated that 5,7% of the total population with a higher education degree had left the country. Most recently, a GALLUP study on the “desire to migrate” among those aged 15 and older conducted across the 12 former Soviet Union countries, indicated that 40% of Armenians desire to migrate to another country permanently in comparison to the 15% average for all the 12 countries.¹⁴ *In sum, a substantial number of graduates are leaving the country each year. Even more worryingly, this number has most likely gone up in recent years.*

Migration is a problem for the country, but it also provides some opportunities. The most obvious is the enormous amount of remittances that currently sustains the country, as well as some universities. Moreover, those who have gone to Western Europe or the U.S., are often organized in alumni associations. Some of these groupings are even civically active, seeing themselves as a force for change. Reform-oriented actors inside Armenia, including OSFA, could consider working with those groups active outside the country to expand the network of reform-minded individuals.

¹⁰ Daniel Ioannisyanyan. 2012. Government Advice to Scientists: Leave this country. HETQ. <http://hetq.am/eng/articles/21004/government-advice-to-scientists---leave-this-country.html>

¹¹ World Bank Net Migration Statistics.

¹² State Migration Authority. 2013. http://www.smsmta.am/?menu_id=18

¹³ Minasyan, A. B. Hancilova. Labour Migration from Armenia in 2002-2005. A Sociological Survey of Households. Yerevan: OSCE. Pages 34-35.

¹⁴ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/161591/desire-leave-fsu-ranges-widely-across-countries.aspx>

III.1.i. The educational model in Armenian higher education

As part of the study we have attempted to understand what could be called “the educational model” in Armenian higher education at present time. By the educational model we mean how the students are educated, or what the main goals of learning and learning patterns in higher education. In this attempt, we have identified and propose to retain the following characteristics:

- the education model is based on theoretical, if not abstract learning, there is little programmatic attention to practical aspects (with notable exceptions in some faculties and departments);
- there is no systematic concern for cultivating critical or creative thinking; the prevailing model is that of lecturing *ex-cathedra* and asking students to reproduce what they heard from the lecturer;
- there is almost no attention to research in universities; there is strict separation between teaching and research;
- there is a massive disconnect between higher education and the labor market;
- academic performance is tolerated, but not encouraged;
- for many teachers and students, and for an overwhelming majority of the general public, a higher education diploma in Armenia is valued primarily as a certificate, a paper that allows promotion in career, and not as an expression of higher learning;
- it is possible to get a university diploma without much work; it is enough to pay, sometimes not even a bribe, but just the regular university fee, given that universities live on these fees and as a rule do not fail students; good and motivated students are not forced to pay bribes for their grades or diplomas, but they may suffer unfair competition from those who do pay bribes;
- students who are interested in learning have to invest additional resources (including private tutoring, occasionally), sometimes starting with their pre-university years.

In addition, there are other aspects that might not belong directly to the educational model, but have a direct impact on it:

- university autonomy and academic freedom are curtailed, by law and by virtue of prevailing practices;
- corruption is pervasive and multifarious; it affects all dimensions of the work in higher education and it is largely accepted;
- there is a long tradition of quality higher learning excellence in the country, as well as genuine current domestic capacity, represented by qualified teachers, competent and committed administrators, and intelligent and motivated students; this capacity is affected by the nature of the higher education system itself and also by massive brain drain.

In sum, this is a rather dysfunctional educational model, as such not supportive for the development of an open society in Armenia – rather the opposite. At the same time, the higher education system is not devoid of potential to make a contribution

to the open society, provided however significant changes occur. Among others, significant changes to the current educational model in higher education appear to be necessary.

III.1.j. The space for reform and the reform direction

One of the findings of this report is that in Armenia the space for reform in higher education is undersized and scattered, and that that direction of the reform is hesitant, and occasionally artificial. This situation has a major negative impact on the success of the reform program. Accordingly, *we propose that OSFA concentrate on creating and protecting the space for reform and also on supporting a genuine reform direction.* This recommendation may apply to other actors as well, including the government. But what is meant by “space for reform” and “reform direction”?

In order for the reforms to succeed, actors need to enjoy an appropriate operating space, permissive for their change action. Such a space, which we propose to call “*the reform space*”, includes a mixture of:

- conceptual elements (concepts, ideas about the nature of the change and the new reality that is envisaged to be created);
- political elements (reflecting the balance of power within a specific reform area and in the society as a whole);
- policy and legislative elements (formal regulations and agendas with regard to the reform);
- institutional elements (institutional aspects that impact positively or negatively on the work of individuals and of the respective organizations as a whole; they may include for example institutional governance, infrastructure, employment practices, institutional culture, etc.).

Based on the findings of our research, we assess that the space for reform in Armenia is undersized on all dimensions of the concept. The conceptual underpinnings of the Bologna reforms in Armenia are not sufficiently elaborated. Major elements of the Bologna model are not well understood in Armenia, sometimes they are adopted through a simplistic “copy-paste” method that is not helpful, and there is no serious public discussion about what Bologna, or the Bologna reforms, actually means. Accordingly, when we propose that OSFA and other interested actors focus on creating and protecting the space for reform, we mean in part that it should help bring clarity, consistency, and relevance into the conceptual dimension. This, however, is not the only and most important part of our recommendation. Other dimensions are at least as important. The excessive power grip of the regime limits the space for reform on its political dimension. The policy and legislative dimension also shows shortcomings, given the same disproportionate influence of the political regime, combined with the lack of sufficient policy willingness to promote regulations and policies supportive of genuine reforms. At institutional level, we are also discussing in this report how the existing infrastructure, governance, employment practices result in a rather limited space for reform. In addition, where the space for reform exists, usually created by individuals and organizations

working separately, such “islands” or spots are not connected, they remain isolated, and therefore they do not support building a critical mass or reaching a breakthrough point.

The “*reform direction*” refers to the vector of change. One can distinguish among the intended vector (direction of the reform adopted as part of formal policies and official reform programs), the declared vector (public statements of various actors during the implementation of the reforms regarding the perceived reform direction at that moment, reflecting the particular, potentially partisan standing of the given actors), and the real vectors, which could theoretically be identified through an objective, neutral review of the actual situation.

In Armenia, the government alone has the power to define the vector of change, the direction of reform, as it has the *de facto* monopoly on adopting and implementing policies and legislation. It also has the *de facto* power to control the public discourse on the reforms, for example by proclaiming that a certain direction of reform exists and is successful. The government has been able to exercise almost unchallenged power in defining the nature and the content of the public discourse regarding the direction of reforms in higher education. For example, many actors in Armenia (individuals and organizations) deem privately that the direction of the reform in quality assurance is wrong. Moreover, they also consider that there has been no substantive development with the introduction of the new quality assurance system. However, almost nobody articulates this publicly.

When we recommend that the Foundation focus on promoting and supporting a genuine reform direction, we mean the following:

- The Foundation could support or help to mobilize support for those individuals and organizations that are committed to work for the reform.
- The Foundation, in cooperation with others, including the government, should engage in exercises of advocacy to support a well-informed informed and open public debate about the reforms in higher education.

We recognize that the concern for the reform direction should be of interest to all stakeholders in Armenian higher education, including for the political regime.

III.2. At the level of the universities

III.2.a. Research

Research production at the level of both the higher education institutions and individual academics appears to be significantly underdeveloped, and in fact neglected and undervalued. The interviewees consistently referred to university education as reproducing existing knowledge and mentioned that the process of new knowledge creation plays no or only minimal role in universities. A view expressed in one of the interviews was that “there are no research universities in Armenia, only educational

institutions.” Following the Soviet tradition, research is not supposed to be done in universities, but exclusively in institutes of the Academy of Sciences.

It appears that there are almost no mechanisms or tools available at present that could stimulate research activity in universities. Faculty members, especially in Yerevan, stressed the lack of time and resources as an explanation for the absence of research activity even on a voluntary basis: they would be interested to do research although they are not required to, but they often work at more than one higher education institution in order to make a decent living, which leaves no time for research. Some faculty members mentioned participation in international research projects as a chance to engage in research, or international cooperation via joint degree programs, which also occasionally leads to research partnership opportunities. They also mentioned doing research in their free time - more like an extracurricular activity than a core one. Others, for example in engineering fields, deliberately choose to focus on theoretical aspects of their disciplines because those require less financial resources to conduct genuine research.

The absence of research in universities and the almost complete separation between research and teaching is one of the major shortcomings of the educational model in Armenian higher education. This shortcoming was acknowledged openly not only by individual academics but also by high-level representatives of the ministry of education, which may help to address the situation in the future.

Based on the international practice, we would like to summarize several arguments in favor of bringing research into universities in Armenia:

- Countries where university research is inexistent or underdeveloped are less competitive globally. Competition nowadays basically takes place as influenced, if not simply dictated, by the rules of the knowledge economy and society. Universities are crucial to the knowledge economy and society. They play a central role in the transmission and dissemination of knowledge, but also in the *creation of new knowledge and use of knowledge*. Armenian universities are engaged almost exclusively in the transmission of knowledge. *Unless its universities engage in the creation of new knowledge through research, Armenia will not be able to build a decent knowledge economy and society. It will remain uncompetitive, dependent on the import of knowledge and knowledge-based products from other countries, and will remain less developed than other countries.*
- The presence of research is a necessary condition to attract and retain bright faculty members, bright minds more generally. They otherwise leave the sector, or they leave the country altogether.
- The complete separation between research and teaching is counterproductive. For example, absent the exposure to research and engagement in research, students and professors often learn with delay, if at all, about the cutting-edge developments in the respective disciplines. Not exposing students to research will naturally lead to problems with preparing the next generations of researchers.
- Integration of research, by excellence a critical endeavor, with teaching helps build critical minds. The total absence of research contributes to a reproductive, uncritical learning environment.

- Absence of research in universities deprives the country as a whole, and also individual local communities, of much needed capacity to identify and analyze current problems, and also of the capacity to develop home-grown solutions for such problems. This is true for the economy, but also for the public administration or others sectors.

The presence of research in universities is a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for a decently functioning higher education system in Armenia.

III.2.b. Approaches to teaching and teaching methodology

Based on the interviews, *two types of teachers have been identified, considering teaching approaches and teaching methodology*. First, there are the more traditional academics that seem to be less interested in changes in higher education and prefer to rely on teaching methods they have used continuously, sometimes for decades. The teaching style of this group has been often called ‘the Soviet teaching style’ characterized by dictating lectures, no use of technology in classroom, reliance on older sources/literature as opposed to integrating more up to date topics from the international literature (knowledge of English can be an issue as well). Although age is not a decisive factor for one’s teaching style, the average age in this group is higher. In some disciplines the average age of professors was indicated to be about sixty years, while some students mentioned professors who were still teaching even in their eighties.

The second group of academics (smaller in number) is typically from the younger generation and has less experience in teaching in comparison to the former group, but often already have international exposure and actively follow developments in their academic areas in the larger international arena (they tend to have better knowledge of English, too). They are often also more innovative in their teaching and student assessment methods, try to use technology in the classroom and for learning more generally, and are eager to experiment with new teaching approaches.

Likewise, the students can be divided into two groups, and this division is quite clear to lecturers who interact directly with students and reflect critically about their experiences. A large number of students have been identified as unmotivated, diploma-rather than knowledge-seekers, and not interested in learning. Those students try to avoid courses with new teaching methods, as those are considered to require ‘more work’. On the other hand, there are also students who are determined to make their university experience as valuable as possible, and who are genuinely interested in learning. On their own initiative, they seek out opportunities for international exchange programs or study abroad, they volunteer in extracurricular activities that will enhance their learning process, for example in moot court competitions in law; they are resourceful in finding additional information in the field of their studies using various online resources, including international ones.

Such polarization across both constituencies, teachers and students, does not create an optimal learning environment. In fact, it appears to create tensions and

problems in the system. For example, as indicated by several interviewees including students, those teachers who are interested in implementing new approaches to teaching and consequently to student assessment often face pressure and criticisms from their department management and their peers from the traditional group and sometimes also resistance from students.

The use of electronic resources or online activities for the purpose of teaching and learning is extremely limited in Armenia. The infrastructure is largely underdeveloped or simply missing. Students at most universities are not provided even with an email account by their universities (even the flagship Yerevan State University is only now in process of providing its students with university email accounts). Some universities do not even have reliable internet-connections. Knowledge about the use of modern technology for teaching is limited. Sometimes students know more about this than their teachers as they access programs offered online by institutions from other countries.

We would like to note what appeared to be a notable exception and a very encouraging example. The IT Educational and Research Center at the Yerevan State University is running several online courses or courses using blended learning, sometimes in cooperation with foreign partners, and sometimes including research (for graduate-level courses), resulting in publications in reputable international journals. These initiatives were started with Foundation support and they appear to work very well, attracting even international attention.

Despite our efforts, and despite the fact that the Foundation ran a special program to support libraries, we have not been able to assess the situation with regard to the availability of electronic library resources in universities. From the interviews with students and faculty, which we have not been able to corroborate sufficiently, it appears however that such resources are extremely scarce. *Opening up the higher education system, supporting the improvement of teaching and learning, as well as the introduction of research in universities will not be possible without the development of a good university library system, which, among others, should provide access to electronic resources, and support and stimulate the use of advanced learning technologies and approaches.*

III.2.c. University administration, leadership and management

As in any other country, the success of the reforms in higher education depends, among other factors, on the quality and behavior of the university administration, management, and leadership. We have been able to identify several key challenging aspects in this area:

- Lack of transparency in university management is a significant problem, especially when it comes to hiring/firing staff and to university finances. Human resources management represents a big challenge; current practices and policies are professionally underdeveloped. For example, staff management, including contractual aspects, appears to be largely discretionary, as explained below in the

section about faculty (section III.3). As another example, no public information is provided where the university money is going into, and how much there is.

- Professional capacity in financial management is limited; people responsible for financial management have no proper **management** training or expertise, beyond following strict accounting rules. At the same time, the institutional set-up for financial management is dysfunctional and relies on major contradiction at its very core. State funding for public universities represents only from 9% - 30% of their total budget. On the other side, the state control on the use of funds, even though privately generated, is complete. Talk and plans at government level, with World Bank support, to change this set-up have not yet materialized. Such plans are still being currently debated within the government and the creation of a new funding system was mentioned as a matter of current concern when we met ministry of education officials. Could Bologna help here? It is true that financial management at institutional level has not been the subject of any major or systematic reflection in the context of the Bologna reforms anywhere, despite encouragement from the European Commission or the European University Association (EUA)¹⁵. *Armenia's term at the helm of the Bologna process, through hosting the Bologna Secretariat between 2012 and 2015, may represent a good opportunity. Armenia has chosen governance and funding as the main themes for this period for the entire Bologna process, which is an eminently good choice for the country itself and for the entire European Higher Education Area. This may be an opportunity to draw attention to the importance of financial management at the level of the institutions in Armenia as well, as opposed to the existing discussions, somewhat sterile and concerning system-level only financing aspects.*
- In addition to politically-based obstacles at system level, the reforms in higher education get stuck at the level of top and middle management. There are several possible explanations for this situation. One of them has to do with the fact that there seems to be a shortage of more innovative, younger academics in leadership positions – they have either left the country or do not get promoted. We have very rarely been able to meet younger academics in top positions, such as pro-rectors, for example (still, they exist in a few places, and they seem to be making a difference even when they do not take an open “revolutionary” approach). Most often, older professors with vast experience “of the old kind” appear to be in power in of universities. They are not so much motivated to change at this stage; they are comfortable in their current positions and roles, although there are some exceptions in this category as well.
- While in other countries universities encourage professors to gain international experience and become more open to global developments in general, it seems that in Armenia when this happens it is more the initiative of the individual

¹⁵ See for example the EUA projects and reports on EUDIS: European Universities Diversifying Income Streams (2008-2011) or on Financially Sustainable Universities: Towards Full Costing in Europe's Universities (2006-2008), as well as the EU Higher Education Modernization Agenda (http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/agenda_en.htm)

academics themselves who often have to face hurdles on the way. Information about international partnerships and cooperation and about exchange agreements is not readily available and accessible to teachers. There are no incentives or recognition for those who win prestigious international fellowships. International mobility of staff is seen as an administrative process ('fill out forms, file a report when you are back'-type of approach).

III.3. Faculty members (academics)

The overall image of an academic instructor appears to have deteriorated recently and with it the public standing of the profession. This acts a disincentive for being a university lecturer, and it begins with the very legal status of the profession. All teaching staff is hired on short-term contracts of one to five years¹⁶, allowing administrators a frightening level of control over who and how is hired and fired. In addition, Armenian academics have some of the lowest salaries in the world¹⁷ and there are strong disparities in salaries between the regions of the country. Moreover, it appears that there is no recognition for those faculty members who are more active and successful, be it locally, internationally, in research projects or other initiatives.

This situation creates perverse effects, including strong disincentives for academics to engage in substantial reforms.

Because salaries are extremely low, as a rule academics need to take up jobs in several universities to make up for the low income in one place. The effect on their teaching performance, willingness to engage in research, or public service will be understandably negative. To quote one professor: "I teach eight subjects at my university and my monthly salary is enough to survive three days... what kind of research are we talking about?" Sometimes faculty members even teach without pay, leading some professors to talk about 'teaching as volunteer work'. On occasion, teachers contribute with their own funds, earned elsewhere, to their institutions, for educational materials. Others accept bribes from students to pass them, give them good grades, or take "fees" to write papers instead of the students. As explained in section III.2.a above, the academics have to be creative in order to be able to pursue their research interests and seek out opportunities for research; mostly they are too busy and too tired from numerous teaching positions.

Positive results and achievements by the university staff – delivering good teaching, sustaining quality, generating new knowledge through research – appear to happen mainly *in spite of* and *not due to* the university and the conditions it creates. The infrastructure, to add another example, is insufficient, for both teaching and research. As one professor put it, "I only have a table in the university and there are people who don't even have a table". Faculty members are kept insecure, given the dominant employment

¹⁶European Commission. 2012. Higher Education in Armenia. Brussels: EACEA.

¹⁷Altbach, P. G. (ed.) 2012. Paying the Professoriate. A global comparison of compensation and contracts. London: Routledge.

of short contracts, renewable at the will of the administration. There are no professional associations in Armenia, to support the organization of the faculty along professional lines, and there are no trade unions either.

These circumstances converge in creating serious issues of academic integrity, academic freedom, and academic performance.

III.4. Students

We have identified several issues regarding the students, which need to be expressed in this focused review of the higher education system of Armenia:

- As mentioned above in the section about the educational model (III.1.i.), very little is done to provide students with practical skills and abilities; as a rule, higher education in Armenia remains eminently about theoretical, abstract knowledge (certain departments and faculties diverge from this model).
- Students, but also professors and members of the management, feel that there is a significant disconnect between the education model in Armenian higher education and the reality of the labor market.
- Many students today have a different attitude to learning than their professors. They often have better language skills and capacity to use technology. This may create tensions between students and professors, which may eventually play a positive role. The use of alternative educational offerings, although limited at present, can create new opportunities for students, both for professional advancement and for cultivating individual freedom and autonomy.
- Professors and university administrators often serve as role models to students. Considering the present characteristics of the higher education system as a whole, and in particular the way many professors and university administrators act in their everyday work (including corruption, self-censoring, etc.), the “model” proposed to students is at best ambivalent, when not simply negative.
- Student public engagement is in general very limited. It appeared that students outside the capital (in smaller university communities) are more active and engaged.
- Students are not well organized and as a consequence their voices are not really heard. When they are organized, it is often under the flag of political organizations (parties), sharing the ideology and agendas of those organizations. Some progress is to be noted recently regarding student participation. The student voice has been strengthened in recent years, through legal reforms that allow for student participation in university governance. By law, students represent a significant percentage of the membership all university governance bodies. Also, a national student association, ANSA, has become a member of the European Students’ Union. However, many of these initiatives have been closely monitored by the political structures, often accompanied by direct political intervention. Many of the current student initiatives seem to be aimed at providing its leaders with a political career, rather than supplying engaged student leaders in the

universities. For example, it is still a commonly held view by the university administrations that ‘students should be in the classroom, not on the streets’. But we also heard a pro-rector of a major university complaining that the students are too quiet, they never make any contribution in the university Senate, which they could and should do given their significant number.

III.5. Change agents: “Armenia’s 100”

Throughout our research in and on Armenia, we have tried to identify who the actual and also potential effective agents of change might be, and “how many” there are, primarily within the higher education system itself. By “agents of change” in this context we mean those who understand the need for reforms, are competent, and are willing to actively contribute. In particular, we were interested in those individuals who understand how the Bologna reforms could deliver, and who are committed to make these reforms work beyond simple façade alterations. It has been confirmed in the interviews that there are such people at every university in Armenia, in NGOs and in government structures, even though their number at present is still very low.

We can state with confidence that change agents do exist in the Armenian higher education. Some of them have already assumed this role openly. Others have the potential to act as agents of change but hesitate to do so, or are simply not aware of how it could be done. *We believe that any systematic attempt to convert the current reform program in Armenian higher education into a successful and genuine endeavor should pay attention to both actual and potential agents of change.*

Based on our observations and the interviews, among the agents of change we include the following:

- Reform-minded academics, those who teach differently, who eventually get published in international journals, who organize new programs and activities, mainly with international funding. In this group there are people who may have already lost some of their motivation and enthusiasm and no longer believe that changes can become reality. Thus, it might be needed in some cases to “re-activate” them.
- University administrators and local higher education experts who have a history of engagement with the Bologna reforms, who understand the reality, the limitations and the potential of these reforms, and are independently minded. We asked in the interviews *how many individuals there are in Armenia “who really know” and “are really working” for reform. The answers have been consistent that this number it is “about 100”*. We did not have the possibility to check this estimate, but a group (or “club”) of knowledgeable and dedicated 100 could be something to count on. These people currently work mainly as isolated individuals, or in isolated small groups, like small islands in the system, having to face a lot of pressure coming from their rectors, deans, colleagues, and family members etc. *These people’s feeling of being isolated in their efforts and thinking transpired very strongly in discussions.* Occasionally, the reverse is also

true, and in some cases individuals who work as agents of change enjoy the support of their deans, rectors, or colleagues. *There is no formal or organized “club of 100” at present, nor any forum or mechanism to bring them in contact with each other, to work together, or just provide mutual support.* The only existing initiative in this direction appears to be a small Facebook group, at times influential in raising certain issues or calling attention of responsible people.

- Smaller youth and student activists initiatives exist (e.g. debating clubs, youth NGOs, some student councils) with less knowledge about higher education, but perhaps more energy and stamina to engage in campaigns on sensitive issues such as corruption or politicization of the universities;
- After about eight years of Bologna reforms, *there are more people in the system than the 100 that are technically competent and could contribute to the reforms.* But they lack the commitment or the incentives, a proper “reform space”, to engage in favor of breakthrough changes, although some of them are tempted to try, lead by professional if not moral or political motivations. We have met such people. They work in universities, NGOs, but also in government agencies, and in the government itself. We believe that they represent an important reserve that should be mobilized if the transformation of higher education in Armenia were to succeed. While not easy, it should be possible to achieve such mobilization, be it only partial. Of course, this mobilization alone, if successful, will not solve the problems of the Armenian higher education, as other factors and actions will have to be considered, but it could be of tremendous help.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FOUNDATION

Based on the findings of the review we propose that OSFA consider adopting a **new strategic focus** and a **new operational approach** for its higher education strategy. The new focus we recommend is *to help create and protect the space for reform and help sustain a genuine reform direction.* The concepts of *space for reform* and *reform direction* as used in this report are detailed in the section III.1.j.

In terms of operational approach we propose that the Foundation *move more energetically from trying to address existing issues directly to mobilizing and helping other actors to address them.*

More specifically, we propose that OSFA consider including the following in its new higher education strategy:

1. **“Social brokerage”**. Rather than attempting to *do* the reform itself, OSFA could instead *promote* it by providing and mobilizing support for knowledgeable, currently mostly isolated, and occasionally brave actors - individuals and organizations, who are willing to do the necessary work. This could mean: providing and mobilizing support for their existing reform initiatives or for their ideas for new initiatives; help to bring them together and to organize them in order to make possible mutual support, with a view to increasing the effectiveness of their separate actions or “individual shares” (therefore the metaphor of social

brokerage). *We asses that by strategically building on existing developments and efforts it will be possible to ensure progress in the direction of reaching a critical mass or a breakthrough point.* For the reform in Armenia to succeed, significant resources would be needed. OSFA has an ambitious mission but limited resources. To succeed in this area, OSFA could make it a priority to mobilize international support (professional, financial, and political) for the individuals and organizations mentioned above, rather than just provide direct support based on its own resources.

2. **Advocacy and opening up public dialogue.** A major problem in Armenia is a certain degree of public silence around the actual situation in higher education, the small number of public voices that could provide critical information about what is going on, or could help to disseminate good ideas and practices. *A public discussion about “what is going on” should concern not only the policies and actions of the government, but also of the universities, as well as other actors, in particular the international organizations and the Armenian Diaspora.* OSFA could stimulate the production and dissemination of information regarding the actual situation, primarily through applied research. It could also provide support to those committed to the reform and who are willing to engage in an open, constructive dialogue, but would normally be silenced by the manifold force of the “coalition of the unwilling”. For this, OSFA could promote applied studies and research, and information sharing (e.g. through regular electronic newsletters and open discussion fora). It could engage in exercises of advocacy at national and international level, using the results of applied research and studies. Once again OSFA would not need to rely exclusively on its own financial resources and staff, but could help to mobilize funds and other types of support from other sources.
3. **A new rhetoric.** We propose that OSFA adopt and promote a new, more positive, and at the same time more assertive rhetoric about Armenia as part of its higher education strategy and activities. *The basic message we propose, based on the findings of the review, is that real, substantive change in higher education is not only necessary, but that it will happen, and that formal reforms are at a point where they could transform into real reforms.* Indeed, significant change is possible, and with some effort it will happen, given everything that has accumulated in the system in the last several years (new structures, forms, norms, etc., even though still moderately effective, as well as access to information globally), and also given the expertise and commitment of many individuals in universities, state agencies, government, and non-governmental organizations. Many recognize that maintaining the status quo is not an option; too many young people will continue to leave the country, and too many of those who stay will continue to have too few skills to contribute to Armenia’s political, cultural and economic development. The country needs its youth talent for the economy, the civil society, and for the reconstruction of a respected cultural space.

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