

Does Armenian Higher Education System Enjoy Academic and Institutional Autonomy Required by the Bologna Process?

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Abstract The purpose of this working paper is to look at the higher education system of Armenia and find if it is institutionally autonomous thus academically free from the Bologna Process perspective. The paper shows that principles and norms on institutional autonomy are neither enforced by law nor implemented in practice. The study comes to this conclusion through careful review and examination of domestic legislation and policy on higher education in Armenia and by comparing them to the standards of the European Higher Education Area.

Keywords: Education, Higher Education, Postgraduate Education, Doctoral Education, Research Institutions, Higher Education Institutions, University, Institutional Autonomy Academic Autonomy, Academic Freedom, Education Expenditures, Education Finance, Tuition, Governance of Education, Management of Education, Higher Education System, Armenia, Bologna Process, European Higher Education Area

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This research seeks to assess the level of institutional autonomy of the higher education system in Armenia and review to what extent it is consistent with the standards of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Notwithstanding the number of important principles of the Bologna Process that are assigned by law in Armenian domestic legislation on higher education, many norms of the EHEA prescribed on paper are not followed and implemented in practice. Furthermore, many fundamental provisions of the Bologna Process are not yet enforced in domestic legal acts and there is an urgent necessity for further regulatory reforms in the sphere of higher education. Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are cornerstones of the Bologna Process of which Armenia is a member¹. Academic autonomy is defined as freedom in knowledge creation, learning and teaching with no state intervention. Higher education

¹ Institutional and academic autonomy of the universities is defined by the following documents of the Bologna Process: Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention) 1997; Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education (Bologna Declaration) 1999; Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area 2010; Berlin Communiqué 2003; Bergen Communiqué 2005; London Communiqué 2007; Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué 2009; Bucharest Communiqué 2012, Yerevan Communiqué 2015

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institutions are institutionally (as such also academically) autonomous when their academic and administrative power is free from state control and interference². The role of the government is seen solely as a quality control, monitoring and supervising body. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are inseparable indicators of a democracy. Academic freedom cannot exist without institutional autonomy of the higher education institutions³.

Being inherited from the Soviet era the Armenian system of higher education is highly centralised. My central argument is that no tangible reforms in liberalisation and decentralisation of the higher education system have been implemented so far in Armenia. This undermines democratic principles in governance of higher education, directly violates basic requirements of the Bologna Process, and strongly hinders the process of integration into the EHEA.

A research gap exists in the studies and analysis of higher education reforms in post-communist countries, including Armenia, from the perspective of the Bologna Process and in the context of institutional and academic autonomy. Various national and international reports, studies and policy papers on the Bologna Process implementation provide data on the introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System in the EHEA, promotion of students and academic mobility, recognition of qualifications, transfer to a three-cycle qualifications system, equality policy, and social dimension⁴. However, no or very little research data and analysis are available on academic autonomy in those countries, while these issues need urgent analysis for future regulators and policy makers. For this essay I employed qualitative research methods, more specifically - content analysis, as I was interested in focusing on the particular categories needed for this topic analysis. I employed the case-study approach focusing on Armenia. My literature survey consisted of the Armenian and Bologna Process and the EHEA documentation, legislation, treaties, reports, and policies.⁵ I carefully reviewed regulations, policy papers, recent

2 Robin Middlehurst and Pedro Nuno Teixeira (2012), *Governance Within the EHEA: Dynamic Trends, Common Challenges, and National Particularities*, in *European Higher Education at the Crossroads: Between the Bologna Process and National Reforms* ed. by Adrian Curaj, Peter Scott, Lazăr Vlasceanu, Lesley Wilson, Part 1, Chapter 29, p.527, Springer.

3 Adrian Curaj, Peter Scott, Lazăr Vlasceanu, Lesley Wilson (2012), *European Higher Education at the Crossroads: Between the Bologna Process and National Reforms*, Part 1, Springer.

4 Sargsyan Y. L. and Budaghyan A. S.(2008), *Bologna Process in Armenia: A Guide*, National Centre for Strategic Studies in Higher Education, Publisher: Antares, Yerevan (Language: Armenian); Sargsyan Y. L. and Budaghyan A. S. (2007), *Reshaping a Postgraduate Education Sector in Armenia in the Context of the Bologna Process: A Strategic Outline for The Reforms Agenda*, Open Society Foundations – Yerevan Branch, National Centre for Strategic Studies in Higher Education, Yerevan (Language: Armenian).

5 Principles, conventions, declarations, communiqués, action plans, memorandums, national and international implementation reports of the EHEA on the Bologna Process are available at <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=73>; The Law of the Republic of Armenia on Education (14 April, 1999, N HO – 297); The Law of the Republic of Armenia on Higher and Postgraduate Professional Education (14 December, 2004, N HO-62-N); The Law of the Republic of Armenia on Scientific and Engineering Activities (5 December, 2000, N HO-119); The Law of the Republic of Armenia on Military Service (16 September, 1998, N HO-250); The Decree of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia N 740-N on “Admissions Procedures to Postgraduate Study Programmes (Aspirantura) in the Republic of Armenia” (15 September, 2006, N 740-N); Government Resolution of 8 August 1997 N 327 on “Procedures of Awarding Scientific Degrees in the Republic of Armenia”; Government Resolution of 31 March 2011 N332-N on “National Education Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Armenia”, Government Resolution of 26 December 2002 N 2140-N on “Adoption of the Procedure on the Conscripton to a Compulsory Military Service of those Individuals, Who Had Defended their Dissertations, but Have Not Yet Got an Approval from the Higher Attestation Commission of the Republic of Armenia at the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia and Students Who Have Completed their Postgraduate Programmes (*Aspirantura*) and Have Got Appointed the Date of the Dissertation Defence”;

and proposed reforms in higher education in Armenia in the context of the Bologna Process. As said above, institutional autonomy and academic freedom are in the heart of a high quality education system. The system of higher education in Armenia, I argue, undermines democratic principles of its governance. It violates the basic requirements and principles of the Bologna process and is inconsistent with the EHEA standards.

Below there is a short summary of those provisions in Armenian higher education system that create serious obstacles in the process of integration into the EHEA and democratisation of the system in general.

- The Government, having its top officials as heads of public universities' and other higher education institutions' councils directly influences the election of universities top management, strategy of universities development and building of academic and scientific policies. Members of the councils include officials from the government and parliament representing the ruling political party. As a result, the system of universities' governance is extremely politicised, and universities are used as an effective tool in various political processes.
- The National Centre for Professional Education Quality Assurance (ANQA) is a foundation responsible for institutional and programme accreditation and audit of public and private higher education institutions. Head and members of the ANQA's council are also governmental officials. Such a system undermines institutional independence of the ANQA and may be used as a manipulative tool against the universities' decision-making process.
- The funding system at the higher education institutions is another obstacle for institutional autonomy. Student funding at public universities operates under a centralised system of state order. Every year the government gives out funding to public universities with a certain amount of student sits where prospective students will be admitted free of charge. Students do not receive a state scholarship as individuals, but get a state order placement instead. Therefore, the universities compete to receive more state order placements from the government that is another strong technique to subordinate the universities and hinder their academic and institutional freedom.
- Important regulatory inconsistencies with the norms of the Bologna Process exist at a post-graduate education level. Higher education institutions are not entitled to award postgraduate degrees. They do not possess a mandate to form doctoral dissertation examination and assessment commissions. Doctoral degrees are awarded and academic titles of Professor and Associate Professor are conferred by the Supreme Certifying Commission (SCC) of the Republic of Armenia (also known as the Higher Attestation Commission or VAK) that is a division under the Ministry of Education and Science. Another of SCC's mandates is to establish and coordinate a commission for doctoral dissertations defence inside the universities. Furthermore, the Ministry's subdivision has a total control over the structuring of a postgraduate teaching process. Hence, higher education institutions do not possess the freedom to construct doctoral programmes independently. All the above mentioned strongly undermines creativity and academic

Government Resolution of 26 April 2007 N 581-N on "Adoption of the Procedure on the Standard Contract Pattern with Postgraduate Students (*Aspirants*) and on the Procedure of Employment at Educational or Scientific Institutions Running Higher and Postgraduate Education Programmes for those Specialists Who Have Studied at and Completed a Postgraduate Programme (*Aspirantura*) under a State Order Scheme"; Government Resolution of 9 July 2001 N615 on "Adoption of the Procedures on Conferring the Titles of Professor and Associate Professor in the Republic of Armenia", and others.

freedom of the Armenian postgraduate education⁶.

Recommendations

A Preamble to the Lisbon Recognition Convention attaches: "... great importance to the principle of institutional autonomy, and conscious of the need to uphold and protect this principle..." In the meantime, Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué states: "The necessary ongoing reform of higher education systems and policies will continue to be firmly embedded in the European values of institutional autonomy, academic freedom and social equity and will require full participation of students and staff."⁷ Yerevan Communiqué says: "Together we are engaged in a process of voluntary convergence and coordinated reform of our higher education systems. This is based on public responsibility for higher education, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and commitment to integrity."⁸ We will support and protect students and staff in exercising their right to academic freedom and ensure their representation as full partners in the governance of autonomous higher education institutions⁹." According to the Salzburg II Recommendations: "Institutions need autonomy to be able to establish, and be accountable for, diverse structures with different research strategies and strengths."¹⁰

Based on the given analysis the following reforms should be carried out in the system of higher education in Armenia:

- The centralised system of state order must be abolished. Instead, a state merit based system of fundings and scholarships, based on such criteria as exceptional talent, financial incapacities, and other should be implemented. The scholarships/fundings must be awarded to the students in person, not to the higher education institutions. This will secure the impartiality and independence of the universities from the government.
- The councils of universities and accreditation agencies should consist of independent members having no professional relation to the governmental institutions.
- The awarding bodies of doctoral degrees and academic titles should be the higher education institutions possessing an accreditation to run doctoral programmes. They must have their own, internal academic councils to run and assess the doctoral students examinations, presentations, defence and other procedures. These councils should be independent, and formed by the universities with no state interference.

My research concludes that the function of the state with regard to higher education institutions should fall in the framework of supervision and monitoring. The State should create criteria for higher education management, teaching, research, science and other branches of activity and operation. It must monitor how these higher education institutions follow the criteria and take away their license or accreditation in case of non compliance. The rest should fall within the power of the higher education institutions, with no state intervention into their academic and managerial affairs. In other words, a strong quality control system must exist rather than an activity control and intervention system with strict naming and shaming outcomes. There is a counter-argument to such a strategy claiming that a decrease in quality of the entire educational

⁶ A principle of the higher education institutions' autonomy is also stated in the *Salzburg II Recommendations*, that define the central principles of a postgraduate education from the Bologna Process perspective: European University Association, *Salzburg II Recommendations: European Universities' Achievements Since 2005 in Implementing the Salzburg Principles*, Brussels, 2010, available at <http://www.eua.be/Libraries/Publications_homepage_list/Salzburg_II_Recommendations.sflb.ashx>

⁷ Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, p.1

⁸ Yerevan Communiqué, p.1

⁹ Yerevan Communiqué, p.2

¹⁰ European University Association, *Salzburg II Recommendations: European Universities' Achievements Since 2005 in Implementing the Salzburg Principles*, Brussels, 2010, available at <http://www.eua.be/Libraries/Publications_homepage_list/Salzburg_II_Recommendations.sflb.ashx>

process may occur if giving the higher education institutions an absolute autonomy with no state control. However, such argument can be easily defeated by the unwritten rules of a labour and academic market where potential employers would assess the graduates according to the reputation of the universities they graduated from rather than pure transcript of grades. The better the educational process of a university the better would be opportunities and brand of this institution. Citing the Salzburg II Recommendations: “Embedding in institutional strategies and policies: universities as institutions need to assume responsibility for ensuring that the doctoral programmes and research training they offer are designed to meet new challenges and include appropriate professional career development opportunities”. Finally, making the last reference to the Salzburg II Recommendations: “The crucial role of supervision and assessment: in respect of individual doctoral candidates, arrangements for supervision and assessment should be based on a transparent contractual framework of shared responsibilities between doctoral candidates, supervisors and the institution (and where appropriate including other partners).¹¹”

Impact on the Higher Education System after the proposed Reforms

The best universities of the world are located in countries where the system of higher education is highly decentralised, liberal and open-minded¹². In the host countries of top universities higher education institutions enjoy the highest degree of academic and institutional autonomy what stimulates open-minded approach and creativity in the process of education, science and research. By strengthening institutional autonomy the higher education system of Armenia will, first of all, comply with the standards and fulfill the requirements of the Bologna Process. As an outcome, universities and their direct stakeholders (academics and students) will better integrate into the European Higher Education Area. The consequences would be higher education institutions becoming more competitive on international academic arena and gaining more resources for further development and progress.

Conclusion

It is of crucial importance for the government of the Republic of Armenia to urgently reform its system of higher education, decentralise it and make it consistent with the best European Higher Education Area standards and norms. To achieve this, Armenian higher education institutions must obtain institutional autonomy and academic freedom to become capable of working, creating, and educating without direct state interference.

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- 12 For top university rankings see, for example, QS World University Rankings, U.S. News and World Report University Rankings, Times Higher Education World University Rankings, The Academic Ranking of World Universities -ARWU (Center for World-Class Universities of Shanghai Jiao Tong University) and other sources. For the data on institutional and academic autonomy see the National Reports on the EHEA countries, available at <<http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=86>>

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