

# The American University of Armenia: a New International Cooperative Venture in Education\*

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*A striking example of a new international venture in education initiated by American Academics of Armenian descent in the USA with the support of the University of California and the Armenian General Benevolent Union is the establishment of the American University of Armenia (AUA). The university has launched graduate courses leading to a Masters in engineering and business and will begin similar courses in political science in March 1994. A unique feature is the degree in earthquake engineering intended to help Armenia in its nature-related engineering tasks.*

WHEN one AUA student went home in the evening and continued his studies late into the night, his mother asked why he seemed so happy while working so hard. He replied that for the first time he had learned to enjoy studying. The American University of Armenia (AUA) has quickly become a familiar name in the world of education in the United States, Armenia and the former Soviet Union. Many visiting professors from the United States have taught at AUA and the first graduates of the university have received their Masters degrees in the Fall of 1993. Not so long ago, the idea of establishing an American university in any part of the former Soviet Union would have seemed illusory. Yet, from inception to reality, and despite difficult conditions, this university has found tremendous backing and support in Armenia and the United States, as an institution promoting change, independent thinking and quality education during this critical time of transition in the region's history. For that student and many others, learning has come to mean greater sacrifice, curiosity, challenge, self-motivation and ultimately greater satisfaction.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For many people, Armenia evokes images of the earthquake of 1988, with its enormous human and material devastation. In the aftermath of the earthquake, many western specialists in the field of earthquake engineering visited Armenia and had the opportunity to interact with their Armenian counterparts. It was during one such meeting in 1989, that the idea of an American-style technical university in Armenia came about as a way to build

the basis for modern education and training to remedy past mistakes.

The idea soon evolved into the broader goal of establishing a full-fledged university based on the American model, to which many academics in the US and Armenia lent their support. From this seemingly simple idea followed the earnest pursuit of the organizational framework to make this happen. Leading these efforts were two earthquake engineering professors, Mihran Agbabian of the University of Southern California and Armen Der Kiureghian of the University of California at Berkeley, to whom later joined Stepan Karamardian, former Dean of Business Management at the University of California at Riverside. In a phenomenally short time, the idea became a reality and on September 23, 1991, AUA began instructions with 101 students enrolled. The same day, in a twist of destiny, Armenia declared its independence.

## ORGANIZATION AND FINANCING

AUA was established as an independent institution organized as a nonprofit-making entity in Armenia. The university is the joint undertaking of the Ministry of Higher Education and Sciences of Armenia and the American University of Armenia Corporation, a California public benefit corporation, which provides technical and managerial assistance in the administration of the university especially in matters pertaining to the formulation and planning of academic programs and physical facilities. The corporation is based in Oakland, California, and its activities are overseen by an independent board of trustees and elected officers.

The Ministry of Higher Education and Sciences of Armenia has provided the physical facility of the

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university, located in a six-story building in the center of the capital, Yerevan (Fig. 1). Originally constructed as a center for the political education of Armenia's youth, the building was ideally suited for AUA's purposes and is fully equipped with lecture halls, auditoriums, laboratories and library facilities. The ministry and the government of Armenia have provided ongoing logistical support for the daily operations of the university, as well as funding for the university's local expenses.

What made this undertaking possible was the crucial cooperation and early backing of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), a nonprofit-making corporation, that has provided the lion's share of the necessary funding and commitment. With branches worldwide, the AGBU was established in 1906 as a benevolent organization to preserve and promote the Armenian identity and heritage through educational, cultural and humanitarian programs. The AGBU contributed the initial funding to begin the university and has since committed itself to provide up to \$1,000,000 annually to sustain a substantial portion of its operating expenses. The remainder of the funding is acquired from various government and private grants, including grants approved in 1992 and 1993 by the US Agency for International Development, for capital improvements, to the amount of \$2,450,000.

### ACADEMIC AFFILIATION

From the very beginning, AUA has benefited from a vital working relationship with the University of California (UC). When approached for its technical assistance, the University of California responded by appointing a task force, chaired by the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs William R. Frazer. The task force visited Armenia in July 1990. A year later, the Regents of the University of California agreed to an affiliation whereby UC lends its valuable technical support and educational expertise in assisting the development of the University in Armenia, providing support in the training of a faculty cadre, and the development of a program of ongoing exchange and cooperation. In fact, many high-ranking academics and administrators from the University of California are on the board of trustees of the American University of Armenia Corporation, including its Chairman, Professor William Frazer, Professor of Physics at UC Berkeley.

### MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY

AUA was established to provide university education in accordance with the American system and standards of higher learning. Its long-term goal is to attain quality and excellence in education in an academic environment encouraging free exchange of information and unhindered transfer of knowledge. Through teaching and research, it seeks to



Fig. 1. The American University of Armenia, formerly the Stepan Shaumian Political Education Center, Yerevan.

prepare graduates who can play a constructive role in the social and economic development of Armenia and its region. The use of English as the language of instruction is intended to facilitate communication between graduates of AUA and their colleagues throughout the world and to attract an international faculty cadre and student body.

### ACADEMIC PROGRAMS OF THE UNIVERSITY

AUA currently offers graduate instruction in two colleges leading to the Master degrees: the College of Engineering and the College of Business and Management. A graduate program in Political Science will begin in March 1994. By way of preparation to the academic program of the colleges, AUA also offers its students English language instruction and computer applications courses.

The university offers an intensive English program to provide applicants with a six-month English language course designed to raise their proficiency to the level required to carry out academic work in English (Fig. 2). The courses are especially designed to prepare students in expository writing, oral communication skills, and use of special technical language as required to fulfil their degree requirements in an English-speaking university. Classroom instruction is combined with external practice and application in a sophisticated,

interactive language laboratory incorporating the use of authentic videotaped linguistic and cultural information appropriate for the development of English language skills. The Language Resource Program of the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA), working with Armenian specialists, is responsible for the design, implementation, evaluation and staffing of this program. The faculty, consists of highly qualified Armenian English language instructors and English language teaching specialists from UCLA.

The computer applications program is intended to prepare students in the use of computer software for such purposes as wordprocessing, spreadsheets, database analysis and graphics. Engineering students are also introduced to programming in Fortran or C languages.

The College of Business and Management offers a two-year program leading to the degree of Master of Business Administration (MBA). The academic curriculum is based on the American model with a strong international orientation and attention to the unique resources and circumstances of the country as it goes through the reform process. This program requires students to complete 92 credit-hours of coursework, including 48 credit-hours of core courses constituting a major, 36 credit-hours of elective courses and 8 credit-hours consisting of a management project.

The College of Engineering offers two-year Master programs in Earthquake Engineering and in Industrial Engineering. The Earthquake Engineer-



Fig. 2. Students taking the English Entrance Examination.

ing program emphasizes modern methods for earthquake-resistant design of constructed facilities, and an understanding of the earthquake phenomenon through courses in engineering seismology. The Industrial Engineering program focuses on modern methods of industrial production, quality assurance and management. The Master programs in Engineering require the student to complete 68 credit-hours of coursework, including 12 credit-hours in an approved minor, and the writing of a Master's thesis.

The Masters program in Political Science is a two year program intended to prepare a cadre of public servants trained in the analytical skills of policy research and decision making as well as public administrative skills. The program offers a core curriculum in political thought and comparative politics emphasizing democratic institutions and nation-building processes. The program also offers fields of specialization in public policy and international relations followed by practical applications for the students in government ministries.

Most of the faculty teaching at AUA are recruited from US universities. Professors are hired to teach for one quarter or more. It is anticipated that during the next few years the university will have a core group of US-trained permanent faculty. Despite the distance, the adventure of teaching in Armenia in a new university has awakened the curiosity of many professors. For example, the College of Engineering has attracted Professors Vithelmo V. Bertero, Bruce Bolt, and Shmuel Oren of UC Berkeley, Professors Richard Woods and Movses Kaldjian of the University of Michigan, and Professors Charles Feinstein of Santa Clara University, Richard Bernhard of North Carolina State University, Ara Arabyan of the University of Arizona, and Rashpal Ahluwalia of West Virginia University. Many professors have come out of this experience with a renewed sense of their educational mission and an appreciation of the thirst for knowledge which they encounter in their students at AUA.

AUA intends to enlarge the scope of its academic program in the next few years to include other graduate programs in social and health sciences.

### THE STUDENT BODY

Students are admitted to the graduate programs of AUA based on stringent academic criteria including test scores on GRE and GMAT examinations. AUA has become an official testing center in the region of the Caucasus for these graduate examinations which are offered once a year at the university.

While most students attending AUA during its first year of operation have come predominantly from Armenia, the university has admitted applicants from the neighboring republic of Georgia during its second year. AUA encourages the

enrollment of foreign students and seeks to develop a diversified international student body including students from the region of the Caucasus and other former soviet republics. Scientific education in Armenia has traditionally been strong during the soviet period. Consequently, AUA students, especially those in engineering bring forth a strong mathematical background. This, together with a strong motivation for learning, make AUA students a most interesting group to teach to. After a long and challenging lecture hour, one professor commented: 'It's the students who make it worthwhile for me to be a teacher in Armenia.'

### AUA RESEARCH CENTERS

In addition to the degree programs, each college has also established a research center. The Center for Business Research and Development (CBRD) is designed to promote the economic and industrial development of Armenia and the region and to foster the transition to a free market economy. The center conducts research, develops models and analysis, and serves as a resource and information center for local and foreign firms, government institutions and international organizations. The Engineering Research Center (ERC) is designed to enhance the educational experience of students by having them work on research projects with distinguished professors or scientists from Armenia and abroad. The center conducts basic or applied research aimed at assisting the industrial and economic development of Armenia. It fosters cooperation between the visiting faculty of AUA and Armenian scientists and engineers as well as between AUA and other scientific and educational institutions in Armenia and abroad. Current projects include the investigation of methods for seismic rehabilitation of buildings, theoretical and applied studies in mechanics, and the development of software for various applications.

### UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

AUA also offers an extension program to serve as an educational bridge between the University and the community. This program is intended to offer the adult population of Armenia and the region of the Caucasus with opportunities to pursue practical and professional interests in order to help the social, economic and cultural evolution of the region by keeping abreast of current world developments.

The university recognizes the special need to introduce courses in the field of management, public administration and social sciences at this particular juncture in the region's development. Since its beginning in the spring of 1992, the extension program has included courses on negotiations and settlements, accounting, banking,

finance, taxation, government and the media. Due to a special interest in environmental protection, several short courses and workshops on related topics were offered during the summer of 1993. As a service to the community, the extension program gives special consideration to the educational needs of targeted sectors within the society including those in the government, economic or academic sectors.

Most of the courses offered through the university extension are offered on a non-credit basis and are taught by individuals from the United States with special expertise in their respective academic or professional fields.

### LIFE IN YEREVAN AND ARMENIA

AUA is located in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Yerevan is an urban metropolitan center which is home to about 1.2 million inhabitants. Although the founding of the city dates back several hundred years before Jesus Christ, modern Yerevan expanded considerably during the soviet period. The city lies at an altitude of 950–1200 meters above sea level and is surrounded by beautiful hills and mountains. Mount Ararat is majestically visible from many parts of the city.

The city is built with local *tufa* stone in variations of pink and grey. Like many European cities, it is built around a central downtown area. It has many squares and open spaces offering travellers a chance to explore it by walking along parks, fountains and numerous statues. During the spring, summer and fall seasons, one often encounters open-air concerts, exhibitions and theaters. The city enjoyed a high standard of living by soviet standards.

However, during the past few years, and due to the turmoil in the Caucasus, the city has experienced severe shortages of fuel and electricity.

During the soviet period, Yerevan became an industrial and scientific center with research and development in fields of high technology and defense. The city has many scientific and educational institutes which provide a concentration of highly technical talent. The city also developed an active cultural and artistic life with annual opera, ballet, symphony and theater seasons. Yerevan is home to approximately 20 museums ranging from modern art to history and culture.

Outside Yerevan, Armenia offers many touristic attractions. Geographically, the country occupies an area of approximately 30,000 square kilometers with the majority of its territory lying at an altitude of 1,000–2,500 meters above sea level. Mount Aragats, the highest peak in Armenia reaches an altitude of 4,000 meters. Many historic temples, churches and fortifications, dating as far back as the first century AD, surprise the visitor on top of a hill or in the bottom of a valley offering majestic views and unique historic insight.

The official language of Armenia is Armenian, a language belonging to the Indo-European linguistic family with an alphabet of its own. Most people know Russian, and English has quickly become the most used alternative language. While most Armenians belong to the Armenian Church, which adheres to the basic tenets of Eastern Orthodoxy, there are also segments of the population which adhere to the Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Moslem faiths. Armenians are known for their warmth and open hospitality making the stay of every visitor a very special human experience.