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**Armenian Agrarian Students' Perceptions and Educational Aspirations
During Curriculum Reforms: Bologna to Yerevan**

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Abstract

The 1999 Bologna Declaration signaled change for Europe's higher education institutions. Armenia joined the movement in 2004. By the London conference in 2007, 46 ministers of education had signed a commitment to the European Higher Education Area framework with a goal of common educational currency by 2010. During the London conference, ministers voiced a need to include more student views in policy issues. Thus, Armenian State Agrarian University (ASAU) students were asked about curriculum reform issues that influence their education plans. Nine of ten students reported aspirations to study abroad and wrote the USA, France, Russia, the Netherlands, and Germany as top choices—along with 32 other countries. Half of the sample of 801 indicated advancing professional careers as a highly motivating factor for planning study abroad experiences; four in ten were motivated to learn English or another language. Pragmatically, 46% of students noted subject matter specialty as an important factor when selecting study abroad programs. Students perceived the top three challenges were economic—funding their living expenses and studies, affordable housing, and other financial constraints. These findings led to three recommendations around a central theme of engagement and dialogue. One may expect considerable interest when students are involved in meaningful ways to engage in educational policy development. Actions to facilitate student scholarships and loans and to simplify international travel, university admission, and mobility would increase students study abroad participation. ASAU students are natural allies to assist with the university's emerging transformation into an era of knowledge exchange.

Keywords: Bologna Process, Curriculum Reforms, Student Mobility, Access, Student Perceptions, Study Abroad

Introduction

Today's students live in a world of change—climatic, economic, educational, political, and social change. They are competing and collaborating in an emerging third era of a global knowledge economy that Friedman (2005) called “Globalization 3.0.”

Europeans first sensed a need for a shift to a more relevant university education during the early 1990s, culminating in a 29 country agreement—The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999. This declaration attempts to harmonize curricula design across Europe (Bologna Process, 2005; Roper, 2005; Phelan & Mulhall, 2007). Prior to the declaration, many educational institutions in Europe employed unique systems for documenting student achievement; it was difficult to compare degrees from different institutions and thus inhibited student mobility. The declaration encourages institutions to “speak the same language” with regards to degrees and student transcripts. The declaration and subsequent communiqués are well-known in higher education circles. By May 2007, 46 countries had joined the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) framework with the goal of a common educational market (London Communiqué, 2007; Bergan, 2007; South East Europe Education Cooperation Network, 2007).

Fundamentally, the primary objectives of the transformation included attracting more students to European universities (higher education institutions or

HEIs) and better accommodating students in this emerging third era. University experiences must prepare students for the future—not for the past (Baumann, Bielecki, Heerens, & Lažetic, 2005; Benelux Bologna Secretariat, 2007; European student surveys on the Bologna process, 2006; Geven, 2007; McGowan, 2007). Considering these goals, there is an urgent need to adjust the curriculum to create a more contemporary sphere of learning that features quality assurance, social access, transparency, mobility, and recognition of qualifications.

Students, like other discriminating consumers, hold unique perspectives of what constitutes quality. Marmaryan, Shinn, Briers, and Galoyan (2007) posited that “quality of education is difficult to define but relatively easy to identify. Quality is measured by the product of high aspiration and satisfaction of students, stakeholders, and publics. A quality education increases the student's knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential to perform in a changing world” (p. 26). In this new knowledge economy, students must be able to distinguish between “receiving a diploma” and “receiving a quality education.” Freeman (1997) noted that students have had limited involvement in HEI change; currently, today's student will benefit through early engagement, public dialogue, shared viewpoints, and legitimate participation. Bergan (2003), Freeman (1997), and Roper (2005) advocated that universities recognize students as a key constituency group—thus full members in the Bologna process.

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Glanville (2006) noted that “all higher education institutions should aspire to improve and enhance the education they offer their students” (p. 49). As “insiders,” students have a unique view of university governance and hold valuable perspectives on issues such as curriculum and course development, quality of teaching and learning, student evaluation methods, performance evaluation of faculty and administrators, and various aspects of the collegiate experience (Butler, Griffith, & Kritsonis, 2007). However, European students voiced an assortment of concerns and complaints in their “*Black Book*” (The National Unions of Students in Europe, 2005). In particular, student authors retorted:

What seems to be the biggest problem of the Bologna Process in Iceland though, is the actual promotion of the process. The ministry of education has introduced the Bologna process to some parties involved but to a very limited extent to the students in Iceland. Their main focus seems to be professors, teachers and other HEI staff. Of the Bologna promoters in Iceland there is only one student. (p. 52)

Ideally, the student body should feel they have a voice in governance through a broad base of elected, appointed, and informal student leaders. Much of the dissention and criticism could be reduced by engaging students in early phases of the process. Formal assessment of Armenian student views will help both students and administrators determine and understand the consequences of change.

Few people of the world have witnessed the magnitude of change

experienced by those who inhabit portions of the former Soviet Union such as the Republic of Armenia. This socio-political change has resulted in a need for a “shift” in the educational perspective of the country. This shift is especially important to the Armenian State Agrarian University (ASAU). Agriculture is a major contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the nation. In 2005 the estimated GDP was 4.9 billion dollars (Microsoft®, Encarta® Online Encyclopedia, 2007; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2007) with agriculture comprising 24% of this total (Lerman, 2006), and employing 46% of the workforce (UNDP, 2007). Furthermore, the face of agriculture has changed dramatically in the last 18 years. According to Lerman (2006), four percent of agricultural land in the country was in individual use in 1990 whereas that number had increased to 33% by the year 2000. Due to the lack of arable land in the country (18% of all land area) (Central Intelligence Agency, 2007), the aforementioned 33% of agricultural land now in individual production translates into nearly 70% of the total arable land in the nation. This drastic change in production agriculture calls for individuals better prepared to assist those in the food and agricultural sector.

Purpose and Objectives

Tell me your dreams . . . (Sheldon, 1998)

This study asked second, third, and fourth year students engaged in a cycle one degree (bachelor’s) and graduate students engaged in a cycle two degree (master’s) about their perceptions and aspirations. Specifically, the researchers sought to determine: (1) student plans for future study abroad; (2) sources of motivation to study abroad; (3) perceived challenges associated with studying abroad; (4) factors that influence the choice of a foreign institution for study; and (5) perceptions concerning the

implementation of the Bologna process within their university.

Methods

Survey research methods were used to explore and describe the perceptions and aspirations of 4,349 resident undergraduate and graduate students who attended Armenian State Agrarian University (2007) in the fall of 2007. A replicated form (with minor modifications) of an English-language student questionnaire exploited five categories of European student attributes (Plompen, 2006). Questionnaire items were reviewed and validated by the research team and then translated into Armenian by an Armenian-English language specialist. A pilot-test administered on July 11, 2007, guided the development of the final instrument.

The Armenian instrument included Likert-type scale items to assess motivational factors that influence students' decisions to study abroad, factors that influence the choice of a foreign institution for study, and perceived challenges for students associated with studying abroad. The descriptors for the "motivation" scale were "Does not motivate" (1), "Motivates a little" (2), "Motivates" (3), and "Motivates a lot" (4). The descriptors for factors that influence the choice of a foreign institution for study were: "Not important" (1), "Somewhat important" (2), "Important" (3), and "Very important" (4). The descriptors for the "difficulty" scale concerning the perceived challenges for students associated with studying abroad were: "Not difficult" (1), "A little difficult" (2), "Difficult" (3), and "Very difficult" (4). Opportunities for open-ended responses were provided for students concerning the country in which they intended to study, their decisions to study abroad, and other future plans. In addition, students were asked to respond to demographic questions concerning their sex,

year of birth, degree pursued, academic status, department of study, grades, and methods of financing their education.

A single-stage cluster sample of 850 students was used to ensure representation of departments and degrees. An undergraduate departmental cluster of five or six classes included second, third and fourth year students enrolled in each of six academic departments and the agribusiness teaching centre. The undergraduate classes chosen were representative of the student body. Graduate students were enrolled through the graduate centre. Data were collected from September 24 – 28, 2007. Deans were given a written guide on the purpose and administration, including directions highlighting varying formats of the questionnaire. Professors (lecturers) administered the instrument during class time to undergraduate students in representative courses among second, third, and fourth year students. The dean of graduate studies distributed the instrument to a representative group of postgraduate students pursuing masters' degrees, and graduate students returned their completed questionnaires to the dean's office.

Data were analyzed using SPSS v.10 descriptive statistics, including the calculation of frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and rankings. Participants' open-ended responses were translated into English by the language specialist, and those translated comments were analyzed, summarized, and reported.

Findings

Of the 850 survey instruments distributed, 801 were returned (94%). The six departments within ASAU were represented by graduate and undergraduate students in the agrarian department (n=114), department of veterinary medicine and animal husbandry (n=114), department of farm mechanization and transportation

(n=126), department of land-reclamation, land tenure, and land cadastre (n=117), department of foodstuffs technologies (n=101), and students specializing in economics (n=213), which included undergraduate students in the Agribusiness Teaching Centre and graduate and undergraduate students in economics. Sixteen students did not answer the question regarding their home department. Fifty-five percent of respondents were male and 43% were female with 2% not reporting their sex; 87% of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 22 with a range of 16 to 33. The demographics of the sample were similar to the university population.

The first objective of this study was to determine the student's plans for future

study abroad. Eighty-nine percent (n=709) of students responded that they would like to study at a university outside of Armenia. When asked to list their top four choices of countries in which they would most like to study, 92% (n=740) of the students responded to the question, selecting a total of 36 different countries. When considering all choices of countries made by students, 77% (n=616) elected the USA, 76% (n=606) selected France, 43% (n=342) designated Russia, 32% (n=342) chose the Netherlands, and 26% (n=206) picked Germany. The student's order of preference for the top five countries is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Top Five Countries for Foreign Study Selected by ASAU Students

Country	1 st Choice (n=740)		2 nd Choice (n=699)		3 rd Choice (n=669)		4 th Choice (n=625)	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
USA	264	36	160	23	117	17	75	12
France	203	27	192	27	146	22	65	10
Russia	71	10	86	12	89	13	96	15
The Netherlands	15	2	61	9	79	12	105	17
Germany	60	8	40	6	59	9	47	8

The second objective of the study was to determine what motivated students to study abroad. Students scored nine factors using a Likert-type scale from 1 (Does Not Motivate), 2 (Motivates a Little), 3 (Motivates), to 4 (Motivates a Lot). Half of the students (51%) reported that they were motivated a lot by the opportunity to advance their professional careers, and 43% indicated that learning another language motivated them a lot. A mean score was calculated for each factor using the above mentioned scale; results are presented in

Table 2 ranked by mean score. These findings are consistent with the motivation and values for higher education by high school students in Vermont (Hochschild & Johnston, 1973) and by Russian tenth and eleventh grade students (Krutil & Fursov, 2007).

Table 2

Factors Determining Student Motivation for Study Abroad Experience

Motivating Factors	4	3	2	1	Mean
	Motivates a lot	Motivates	Motivates a little	Does not motivate	
	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	
Advancing my professional career	412	178	61	25	3.45
Learn English or another language	347	235	78	33	3.29
Overall life experience	300	250	79	34	3.23
Important stage in my personal development	322	237	77	47	3.22
Increased employability in Armenia	275	235	125	69	3.02
Learn more about my academic specialization	229	245	117	65	2.97
Opportunity to work in another country after finishing studies	221	225	140	91	2.85
Getting a graduate degree	196	211	132	111	2.76
Opportunity to live in another country/culture	152	212	151	142	2.57

In addition, the research team sought to identify factors that influence student choice of foreign study programs. Students scored 13 factors using a Likert-type scale with the following indicators: 1 (Not important), 2 (Somewhat Important), 3 (Important), and 4 (Very Important). Forty-six percent of students responded that subject matter specialty was the most

influential factor in selecting a foreign study program. The factor ranked as least important was foreign study's accessibility to Armenia, with only 10% of the students scoring it as very important. A mean score was calculated for each item using the above mentioned scale; results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Factors Influencing Student Choice to Study Abroad

	4 Very Important	3 Important	2 Somewhat Important	1 Not Important	Mean
Motivating Factors	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	
The subject matter specialty	369	255	54	16	3.41
The university	274	304	76	29	3.20
The language spoken in the country and/or the university	272	300	94	23	3.19
Information available about the country, university, and program	235	277	117	36	3.07
Affordability	227	280	127	35	3.04
The reputation of the university	223	271	129	45	3.01
The country	248	255	129	72	2.96
The reputation of the specific program or department	202	281	127	53	2.95
Having friends studying at that university	156	224	190	105	2.64
Cultural attractions in the area	114	237	230	85	2.57
Having friends and family in the area	109	191	239	128	2.42
Weather conditions/climate	84	147	232	208	2.16
Accessibility to/from Armenia	81	137	181	274	2.04

The third objective of this study was to identify the perceived challenges for students associated with studying abroad. The top three challenges perceived by students were related to funding issues, with 40% of the students scoring as “very important” at least one of the three funding issues statements. A mean score for difficulty rating was calculated for each of the factors making study abroad a challenge; results are presented in Table 4. These challenges were consistent with the findings of Chumakov, Bruening, Frick, Friedel, and Moreno (2006), Wingenbach, Chmielewski,

Smith, Piña, and Hamilton (2006), and Zhair (2004). During the 2007 fall term, 36% (n=287) of the students had free state tuition, 6% (n=48) had reduced state tuition, and 47% (n=372) paid full tuition. Twenty-two percent (n=175) reported receiving some financial support from home, 11% (n=89) worked part-time to help pay for their education, and 3% (n=18) used savings from previous work to help pay for their education.

The fourth purpose of this study was to identify factors that influence student

choice of a foreign institution for study. Students selected from among international and national press reports or rankings that were important when selecting a foreign university in which to apply. Thirty-seven percent of students reported that international press reports influenced their

selection of a foreign university, and 25% reported that Armenian press reports influenced their selection. Half of the students (49%) responded that they were not aware of reports or rankings or they had no interest in them.

Table 4

Factors Challenging (Making Difficult) the Study Abroad Experience

Challenging Factors	4	3	2	1	Mean
	Very difficult	Difficult	A little difficult	Not difficult	
	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	
Funding your living expenses and studies during the study abroad	249	211	130	51	3.03
Finding affordable and adequate housing	163	225	160	64	2.80
Other financial constraints	147	206	167	63	2.75
Being allowed to study abroad by your present university	121	216	193	89	2.60
Finding admission or being accepted where I want to study	85	243	227	73	2.54
Paperwork required for studying in another country	94	170	209	129	2.38
It would be difficult for me to leave Armenia and/or my family for a long period of time	138	116	183	183	2.34
Dealing with the language barrier	55	194	306	109	2.29
Transferring course credits	55	145	246	141	2.19
Time required to make all the preparations	37	151	229	166	2.10
It is stressful to prepare, organize, and implement	48	102	220	230	1.95
My family makes it difficult for me to consider the opportunity (they don't want me to leave)	85	84	155	271	1.97
I may lose opportunities in Armenia if I leave for a year	35	65	134	365	1.62
It is not about the difficulties, I am simply not interested in studying abroad	19	28	43	157	1.63

Student perceptions regarding the implementation of the Bologna process within the university framed the fifth research objective. Among the 801 respondents, half of the students (48%) were not aware of the Bologna process while half (49%) were somewhat aware or very aware of the Bologna process. This finding is consistent with that of Place, Irani, Friedel, Table 5

and Lundy (2004). A related question, then, asked students about their perceptions concerning ASAU's progress in the Bologna process. Of the 533 who responded, half perceived that little or no progress had been made regarding the Bologna process, and the other half perceived that some or much progress had been made (Table 5).

Student Perceptions Concerning Progress of Bologna Process

	<i>f</i>	%
Much progress has been made and almost completed	37	7
Some progress has been made but a little work remaining to be done	230	43
Little progress has been made but much work remaining to be done	156	29
No progress has been made and a lot of work remaining	110	20

Students responded that when finishing their bachelors' degrees, more than four in 10 (43%) of them intended to study for an advanced degree in Armenia while nearly one in three (31%) planned to study for an advanced degree in another country. Thirty-seven percent of students responded that they will start work after graduation and consider an advanced degree in the future. One in ten students planned to start working in Armenia without considering further studies, and another 10% planned to enter military service.

When completing their masters' studies, about one in five students (20%) planned to change universities and two of every five students (38%) planned to change countries as they continue their education. One in four students (25%) surveyed have applied or plan to apply for mobility scholarships, 35% were not interested, and more than one in four (27%) were not aware of the mobility scholarships as a part of the Bologna process.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

We—like Sidney Sheldon—asked a cast of characters to tell us their dreams. Students told eclectic stories as idealists, pragmatists, and realists. As idealists, they wrote about dreams for foreign study in one of 36 countries and topped their choices in North America (USA), Western Europe (France, the Netherlands, and Germany), and Eastern Europe (Russia). As pragmatists, they wrote about advancing their professional careers and the importance of subject matter, language, and the reputation of the university in career decisions. They were more swayed by recommendations by friends and family than by international rankings and reports. As realists, they recognized tough financial challenges in funding their dreams and a plethora of bureaucratic processes. As pre-Soviet Union dissolution twenty somethings—born between 1980 and 1988 when Armenia was a part of the USSR—

these students were no strangers to political, social, economic, educational, or climatic change. Yet they were assertive and optimistic about their educational future.

Recommendations

Although Ghemawat (2007) argued that the world isn't quite flat, 1) ASAU students should be recognized as a constituency group with a voice in the transformation of curriculum to accommodate an emerging third era of a global knowledge economy; students appear to be ready to give an opinion about university policy and procedures. 2) Many times, early adopters and early majority emerge as elected, appointed, and informal leaders (Rogers, 2003). Engaged student leaders can influence the direction and speed of HEI change. By their involvement in meaningful dialogue of the Bologna Process, ASAU students will feel that their contributions are valued and will take ownership in the transformation. 3) Engagement of students should be organized around multiple strategies including formal and informal activities. McGowan (2007) posited "in a world that continues to move rapidly toward globalization, it is important for students to expand their global awareness and gain international experience" (p. 61). Recommendations for engagement are consistent with those of Bergan (2007), Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005), and Roper (2005). Carlile and Christensen (2004) would likely recommend continued research and theory building by faculty members through descriptive observation, categorization, and association.

Implications

Given ASAU student perceptions and aspirations coupled with a coherent literature base, the research team drew five implications for action: 1) To realize their dreams, students need factual information

about the megatrends that are shaping the global knowledge economy, particularly with respect to the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area. 2) Actions to facilitate student loans and scholarships, especially for study abroad, will help students realize their dreams. 3) Simplification is necessary to facilitate international travel, admission to foreign universities, and student mobility. 4) Engagement of constituency groups in change processes is fundamental. Studies show that organizational change is most associated with universities which engage constituency groups. These same universities demonstrate the most functional autonomy in governance. 5) In this emerging era of a global knowledge economy, students hold unique perspectives of what constitutes quality. Rather than waiting for the world to change (Mayer, 2006), today's students will bring an active voice for tomorrow's positive change.

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