

E ducation in Armenia: A Call for Consensus



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On the Crossroad of opposing opinions

A lot has been said and written about the current educational issues, as well as the present and the future of education in Armenia. It seems that after all these efforts everything should have been apparent and issues should have been clearly defined in both documents and perceptions. Still, a consensus is obviously lacking in the expert community regarding the attitude towards the reforms implemented as of today.

Opinions differ. The first cohort of experts claims, "Within the recent 15 years we have not only failed to implement any serious reforms in the educational sector, but due to the fact that the formal institutional system has not been established, we have ended up in a system of relations which make it simply impossible to implement any urgent reform". The second disagree, "Changes and achievements in the educational sector are a lot and Armenia ranks among the first in post-Soviet countries in terms of pace of successfully implemented reforms". One can but wonder witnessing such a debate.

Agreement on at least one point

Considering various documents regarding education and opinions expressed at conferences or round tables, it can be concluded that one thing is quite obvious: yes, Armenia needs a quality education and both the impediments on the way to this quality and the final goals are clear. A large number of projects have been implemented and are being implemented to achieve these goals.

That's it. The consensus ends here. At this point experts form two camps: some claim that the education is on the verge of crisis and the changes, which provide for the form, unfortunately, do not seriously affect the content. The second camp argues that whatever has been accomplished cannot vanish without any trace and it is necessary to wait at least for ten years in order to see the positive outcomes of the reforms.

How can two parallels meet?

Actually the core of the debate is found in the end and the end is the huge bulk of young graduates, who immediately complete the army of unemployed...

"Tell us what economy you are constructing and we will provide the necessary number and quality of cadre", education specialists call on the economists. "Tell us what human potential you create, so that we can emphasize the adequate sub branches of the economy". This is the counterargument economists put forward. The ancient story of the egg and the hen. However, one has to agree that both claims are quite legitimate.

It seems that the time is ripe for putting an end to the apparently superficial debate between the economists and educators on whether it should be the economy to decide what specialists and quality are needed, or whether it should be the educational policy that has to determine the direction of the economic development given the social capital. This debate already

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resembles a process of shifting the responsibility from one to another. It is time for the decision makers in economic and educational policies to start a dialog and jointly define the final policy which will regulate the educational sector. They should reach a consensus and tell the society where the final destination is and which direction we are heading.

How to do this? Directions are many. Let's point out the simplest. Education specialists develop a list of professions through which our society can make significant achievements. The list can be based, for instance, on our past achievements, inherent capabilities, etc. Economists compile a list of spheres in which our economy should specialize and they should construct this list taking into account the development trends of the global economy, our economic and geographical opportunities, etc. These two groups of specialists bring their lists to the discussion table, discuss those at length and through comparisons and rejections eventually develop a common vision. In the result, a lot is determined, actually, much more, than can be seen at first sight.

One may assume that the above-mentioned can sound not quite serious and some will even repute it as unrealistic, whereas the whole history of mankind continues to prove persistently that solutions to all the serious problems in this world have been started by seemingly romantic commitments of one or two brave spirits.

This paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the round table "Development perspectives of the Armenian Education System", which took place on September 7, 2007. The round table was attended by independent analysts, government officials and representatives of international organizations.