

AZERBAIJAN MOVING TOWARDS EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA – 2005

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500 years ago Europe started to emerge as the new leader of the global historical process. With the discovery of America and determination of the Globe, the invention of the movable printing press, the spread of publication technology, and the formation of universities and scientific thinking, the “European Age” of the world history began. Finally, with the development of capitalism, Europe managed to far outpace the rest of the world.

In the 20th century, rivalry and confrontation between European nations was at its peak; Europe became the scene for two devastating world wars. In 1945, Americans and the Soviets met in the middle of Europe – in Germany. This marked the end of the “European Age” – *an end of the European hegemony* in world politics and economy.

In 1957, a Soviet satellite mobilized America and Europe, and inclination towards integration seriously started to rise in the West. The European Economic Community (European “Common Market”) agreement, signed in 1957, also included provisions on cooperation in the field of education. In mid-1970s, the issue of mutual recognition in the field of education was formulated and from mid-1980s, a mechanism for movement of students, researchers and scholars from one European country to another was devised; programs, like ERASMUS, proved successful in this. One of the most important documents of these years is *Magna Charta Universitatum*, signed in 1988 in Bologna, which emphasizes autonomy and

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independence of universities as the most vital factor in creation of the European Higher Education Area.

The Joint Convention of the European Council and UNESCO on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications and Documents (signed in *Lisbon, on April 11, 1997*) can be considered as the starting of a new period towards unity in the European higher education system. This convention covered such important issues as access to higher education, term of education, and recognition of higher education documents as well as creation of appropriate mechanism for these goals.

After reviewing and discussing the Lisbon Convention, we achieved timely ratification of it by Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, in the following years, important steps taken towards creation of European Higher Education Area, excluding certain exceptions, were not closely observed in Azerbaijan.

On May 25, 1998, in a meeting of the Ministers of Education of four leading European countries – France, Italy, United Kingdom and Germany – held at the Sorbonne, Paris, the ***Joint Declaration on Harmonization of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System*** was adopted. The Declaration proposed to announce European Higher Education Area open, to enable students to continue their education in another European country and to do this through transferring obtained school credit-units. It also proposed two main cycles of higher education, undergraduate and graduate, where, after the first cycle, students would continue their education either towards a master degree or a longer-term doctoral study or research.

In order to transform this initiative of four countries into an all-European movement, a meeting of the Ministers of Education of 29 European countries was held ***on June 19, 1999***, in Bologna. In that meeting, where the three Baltic republics from former Soviet Union also participated, the ***Joint Declaration of European Ministers of Education*** was adopted. It aimed at creating a ***European Higher Education Area (EHEA)*** that would be in a leading position in the

global competition by 2010. To achieve this, the following were proposed (grouping of objectives here is different from the original Declaration):

1. Implementation of easily readable and comparable degrees, applying Diploma Supplement for this purpose that is composed of two cycles. First cycle shall last a minimum of 3 years, and second cycle should lead to masters and/or doctoral degree.
2. Providing free movement of students, faculty, researchers and administrative staff between countries; application of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in the case of movement of students.
3. Establishment of European dimension in higher education. Cooperation in the field of preparing criteria and methodologies for the purpose of quality assurance in higher education.

Approaching with respect various national education systems, lingual and cultural differences, and autonomy of universities, while implementing this program, was specifically emphasized in the document.

After this the process of creation of the European Higher Education Area was called the *Bologna Process* [in my opinion, Sorbonne-Bologna would be a more correct name].

In order to provide coordination in successful implementation of Bologna Process and admit countries that are willing to join the Process, Ministers of Education decided to meet within two years. Through the Prague meeting of May 19, 2001 and Berlin meeting of September 19, 2003, a number of European countries joining the Bologna Process reached 40. It is expected that as a result of the Bergen (Norway) meeting on May 19 this year, Azerbaijan and all remaining European countries, except Belarus, will join the Process.

It has been recognized by everybody that *higher education institutions and students* are not objects but *the main players in the Bologna Process*. The ministers also noted the necessity of keeping close contacts and working in cooperation with such organizations as the European

University Association (EUA), European Association of Higher Education Institutions (EURASHE), European Association of National Student Unions (ESIB), and European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA).

As an advancement of the Bologna Joint Declaration, it was proposed to create *European Research Area* in addition to the European Higher Education Area and to prepare *joint masters and doctoral programs*. It was accepted that doctorate degree was the third cycle of higher education after the two cycles indicated in the Bologna Process. The ministers decided to attach a Diploma Supplement to the graduate diplomas from 2005 onward and took the commitment of creating access to education for everybody, using all available resources and means.

The main demand of European universities, on the other hand, was *autonomy with responsibility*. Universities demanded independence for formulating their strategies, prioritizing fields of studies and programs, and choosing faculty members and students in accordance with their own criteria. Application of tightly centralized administration hinders dynamic development of higher education institutions and impedes their capability to compete and respond rapidly to the needs of the changing environment.

The Bologna Process indicates that in the selection of the higher education model Europe is looking to the United States and is adapting the American experience. In other words, the Bologna Process in some way indicates the *Americanization of the European Higher Education System*.

The Higher Education and Research Area was established on the basis of three-cycle degree system and comparative and accumulative features of credits units which come from the United States – the global leader in higher education. The Regional Accreditation, which deals with the evaluation of the entire institutional quality, and Program Accreditation, which deals with the evaluation of the quality of separate fields of studies, also belong to the American traditions in higher education. Unfortunately, Europe still cannot come to a

common decision on the issue of evaluating quality. If all 45 countries approach the evaluation of their higher education institutions separately, will it be possible to achieve harmonization at all? In the United States only 6 regional associations fully undertake this work. Will regional or other types of broader-scale accreditation agencies be created in Europe too?

From another perspective, whereas independence of US universities and the achievements brought about by this independence are evident, Europe does not seem to be ready to act in American way on this issue; centralized administrative management often puts obstacles on European higher education institutions' assuming autonomy with full accountability. Is Europe completely ready for connecting the issue of accreditation solely with the presence or absence of the state financing and its amount? Also, in evaluating and funding individual projects, Europe seems to be lagging behind America. If these crucial issues are not solved, the idea of transforming Europe into the leading economy as well as highly competitive education and research area globally will sound like an old Soviet motto related to the Soviet-American competition – “*Dognat' i peregnat*” (to catch up and leave behind).

What is the situation in Azerbaijan with regard to the Bologna Process?

However paradoxical it may seem, although in the period of collapse of the Soviet Union Azerbaijan was going through severe political, economic and military crises, in several areas, including education, new ideas were spreading and new discourses and models were emerging. The first private university in Azerbaijan – *Khazar University* – opened and paved a new way for itself and for Azerbaijan in the field of education by offering a new substance and adopting a new form. Applying American-style credit accumulation model and offering programs leading to bachelor, master and PhD degrees since its establishment in 1991, Khazar has played the role of the field for an experiment and clearing-house for reforms in the higher education system of Azerbaijan. For the first time in Azerbaijan, Khazar University has applied a student-centered teaching model, prepared and put into implementation a 100-

points grading system (with 60 points being the minimal satisfactory grade) and took *Grade Point Average* (GPA) as the criterion for granting various distinguished diplomas (honors, high honors and higher honors).

As a result, in 1992, *Milli Majlis* (the parliament) of Azerbaijan passed the *Law on Education*, which was prepared a special working group with participation of the author of this report. The Law constituted a legal basis for the establishment of the two-cycle higher education system in Azerbaijan, namely the system composed of bachelor and master degree studies. Later on all higher education institutions and programs in Azerbaijan, with few exceptions (for medical studies and the like), adopted this system.

However, as transformation to the two-cycle system was not carried out carefully and stage-by-stage, and instead was done in the form of a quick national-scale campaign, the purposes, context and differences between bachelor and master programs have not been grasped by many higher education institutions up until now, and remnants of this “incompleteness” can be observed even today. In addition, the contents and form of studies after masters degree, has not been explicitly established yet. Some people talk about a third cycle of higher education, that is PhD; some others argue for continuation of the old Soviet model of third and fourth cycles, which lead to the degrees of *Candidate of Science* and *Doctor of Science*.

As mentioned above, Khazar has been offering and implementing PhD programs for a long time now and is the only university in Azerbaijan in doing this. But in general, the country is still keeping the system of Candidate of Science / Doctor of Science. *Not enacting the new bill on education keeps this issue and other related vital matters in a frozen condition.*

Usually, in countries undergoing transitional period, important laws need to be amended and/or renewed periodically (for example, every 5 years). Otherwise, inconsistency and contradiction between rapidly changing environment and growing demands, on one hand, and old, obsolete laws, on the other, act as obstacles and hold back development.

Unfortunately, the attempts towards promulgation of a new bill on education, which started

in 1997, have completely failed [and it is to my great chagrin that that draft law under discussion consists predominantly of such stipulations as “under the full authority of relevant executive bodies”].

As a result, governance in the field of education is regulated not by laws, but through personal networks and connections with high-ranking executive officials. Furthermore, the success of an initiative mostly depends on the degree of closeness of the initiator to these high-ranking officials. *What is awaiting us tomorrow?* As long as this question remains unaddressed, it renders useless all strategic development and action plans prepared by higher education institutions.

Endemic corruption and bribery in the education system is another factor leading to strengthening of central administration and strictly diminishing the autonomy of higher education institutions. The role of higher education institutions themselves in proliferation of the problems is quite large. Moreover, lack of working relations between universities and the Ministry of Education as well as the absence of their joint struggle for quality in education has seriously damaged the autonomy and reputation of both.

The saddest point here is that some higher education institutions that do not ‘deserve’, so to speak, this kind of treatment are also subject to it. The few universities that possess exemplary moral environment, offer high-standard study programs, implement modern teaching methods, maintain broad international relations, and whose graduates’ skills and abilities are appreciated highly by the industries and businesses, have also become victims of the general situation prevailing in the Azerbaijani system of education and depend on destiny and fortuity.

Although Khazar University is considered one of the most serious and high-standard universities both according to the public opinion and in the seldom pronounced words of government officials, it has no autonomy in such important issues as student admission, selection of specialization programs, issuing diplomas to its own graduates, etc. *The question here is what private rights do private universities enjoy?* What are the things that make them

private, after all? Private universities pay taxes to the government, but do not receive anything from the state, except for the obstacles to their development...

Among 47 higher education institutions in Azerbaijan, only two universities – Khazar University and a Turkish-sponsored Qafqaz University – apply an education model based on credit accumulation. That is, students study courses which have certain credit value and they receive a corresponding number of credits for each course they pass. The credit unit applied in Khazar University can be considered as two European credits (ECTS).

Credit accumulation model is based on prioritization of individual study trajectories for each student. That is, study schedules are not determined for groups of students, but for each student individually, and accordingly, each student accumulates the necessary number of credits through his/her own way – This is a *student-centered* model. To see at what point a student is in his/her study program, it is enough to know how many courses that student has successfully passed and how many credits he/she received for the passed courses [in order to evaluate overall performance of a student, it is also important to see his/her Grade Point Average].

But it will not be so simple for higher education institutions in Azerbaijan to move towards application of this student-centered credit system. It is an issue of education or university culture, and therefore, it is not easy to implement it quickly, starting it from zero. One of the factors that create difficulties in transition to the credit system is excessive central administration, which is characteristic of most higher education institutions in Azerbaijan. Autonomy of universities and relative autonomy of intra-university units, such as schools, colleges, faculties and departments, is one of the most necessary conditions in application of the credit system, just as in many other things. On the other hand, existence of individual study trajectories for each student may create differences in study periods of various students. If we add the existing broad-scale bribery and nepotism to this, it becomes clear that real transition to the credit system will not be an easy technical issue in Azerbaijan.

A main acting document of Khazar University is the *University Catalog*, which gives information on academic policies and rules of the University, programs leading to various degrees, short description of each taught course, requirements necessary for graduation, as well as on teaching and research bodies, facilities and resources, student support services, etc. The catalog and the fulfillment of its requirements are also important for student mobility. Unfortunately, among Azerbaijani higher education institutions, only Khazar University publishes, on a periodical basis, a standardized comprehensive catalog, which includes all necessary information [information brochures are sometimes published by other universities but are not similar in content to a catalog].

When Azerbaijan becomes a member of the Bologna Process, various Azerbaijani universities will likely join student mobility programs at different times. One of the first and foremost aspects of Azerbaijan's participation in educational programs of European dimension can be preparation of joint degree programs, especially masters and PhD programs, by European and Azerbaijani higher education institutions, which have experience in ECTS and international partnership programs. Of course, autonomy of higher education institutions is an important pre-condition for achieving success in this direction. But in Azerbaijan, as I mentioned earlier, even high-reputation private universities are deprived of their right to issue their own diplomas.

As far as the issue of assuring and increasing the quality of education is concerned, at the moment, discussions on determination of common European criteria and rules as well as activities of corresponding accreditation agencies are going on, and a certain consensus is expected in this area. It is not excluded that the role of certain pan-European accreditation agencies may be increased and new ones may be created. Azerbaijan will have to consider the results of these discussions.

Quality in education is a system of values, a position, and a culture. Quality is changing of the existing form, and permanence of the evolutionary effort. *Quality is a process* and therefore,

the concept of quality enhancement is something more important than quality assurance or quality control.

Who measures quality in higher education institutions and why? There are evidently three candidates that are ready to undertake this responsibility – the education institution itself, the government and independent authorized accreditation agencies. Higher education institutions in Azerbaijan almost do not conduct any serious internal evaluation themselves; but here again, Khazar University is an exception. Khazar regularly conducts internal evaluation with active participation of students, and results of the evaluation are published both on paper and electronically. The experience of the motherland of accreditation – USA – shows that there is no need for direct participation of the state in accreditation; state interference, in fact, can only cause harm. In transition countries, like Azerbaijan, this issue is even more complicated. As a well-known maxim goes sometimes a child forgets that hammer is for hitting a nail, and starts to hit everything with it. The state, when it controls something, like accreditation, behaves like a child with a hammer. That is why the most expedient form of it after internal evaluation is external evaluation carried out by independent authorized accreditation agencies.

This independent quality agency can be a national agency staffed with prominent international experts (if the national government recognizes and registers such an agency) or a regional agency (intra-European) or even pan-European organization.

Accreditation based on impartial evaluation of quality and showing the ways to increase it should mainly result in state assistance to higher education institutions and formulation of the government's policy for this assistance. Open discussions should be carried out on whether there will be financing from state budget allocated to public universities, and if yes, what will be the amount of it. The main result of accreditation for private higher education institutions should be the right of that private institution to obtain credits or loans from the state on very favorable conditions and the right of students of that institution to receive loans from the government also on favorable conditions for paying for their tuitions and fees. Of

course, as a result of a successful accreditation, both public and private universities can receive other types of assistance as well. If the accreditation uncovers the weaknesses or incompetence of a program at an institution, that institution will be ineligible for state credits for development of that program, and accordingly students in that program will not be eligible to receive any state funding for their studies.

One of the crucial implications is that, in Azerbaijan, the state accreditation (the objectivity of which is doubtful) will define whether a private university can accept students to a program or not. Although the government does not extend any financial assistance to private higher education institutions, it has monopolized student admission to them at all levels of studies and tries to restrict admission to private institutions by any means. In terms of the access to higher education, Azerbaijan's rating is one of the lowest not only in comparison to developed countries, but also among former-Soviet republics. Despite this apparent shortcoming, the government strictly prohibits prospective students to get admission to any university they want at their own expense!

On the other hand, public education institutions, fully funded by the government, either are not subject to accreditation at all or their accreditation is only formal. In reality, the government should first of all think about expedience and effectiveness of its budget allocations, and in so doing, should act in accordance with the results of accreditation.

There are *Rectors Conferences* in European countries, which act as main bodies uniting heads of higher education institutions. They actively participate in the discussion of problems in teaching, research, student and faculty exchange, and in general, on correct formulation of academic policies and development. In Azerbaijan, this body exists only on paper. Each rector is trying to keep his head safe, but keeping one's head safe is getting more and more difficult or more and more expensive. The main reasons for rectors (and universities) not undertaking joint efforts in this direction are differences between their aims and purposes. Thus, Azerbaijani higher education institutions are not able to act as players and are rather played with, like toys.

The Institute of Education Policy is starting to function at Khazar University. The main aim of the institute is to study international practices in education, work on quality enhancement of education and problems related to its evaluation, find out ways of development of educational policy and education system in Azerbaijan, and particularly, closely watch the Bologna Process and assist those interested in its furthering.