

“On agencies for evaluating quality of education”

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Quality in education is a system of values. 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?

To increase quality of education, close down, or corruption?

Three candidates that is ready to undertake this responsibility.

Accreditation in the West and in the East. Internal, Government and External-independent agencies. Quality as a process. Recommendations and decisions. Indicators of quality in education sector. Accreditation and corruption. Local, Regional, Pan-European and international agencies. Victims and winners of various types of quality controls. Attitudes of foreign governments on the quality of education in Azerbaijan. Networking for quality of education. The capacity-building, consultations on the education policy, awarding joint/double degrees, and twinning programs. A gap between general (secondary, high) and higher education. Khazar University's role of the clearing-house for reforms in the higher education system of Azerbaijan by offering a new substance and adopting a new form. Internal evaluation with active participation of students. the nourishing of relations with industries as an integral part of its development and its role to uphold the quality of its programs, faculty, support services and students.

The following is a general view on the subject.

1. What is Quality? What is Quality Evaluation?

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.

Industry can foster closer ties to the educational system, including funding to upgrade the quality and quantity of manpower.

2. Why accreditation? To increase quality or close down, or corruption? What to do?

Increasing the quality in education has always been one of the pivotal issues in all civilized countries. However, in transition economies and states which recently gained independence, overall conception of education is being revised and educational reform and reconstruction are widely

discussed. During this process ideas may confront and usually the government keeps the situation under control not with a strategic vision, but through tactical steps. In the modern world, usually accreditation commissions function as the agency for evaluating quality of education. However, in transition countries, subordination of such commissions frequently changes from one institution to another (indeed, new and new commissions are formed), their aims and responsibilities are not clear, and the decisions they make do not live long. These commissions are not able to make decisions based on their evaluations and to show the ways and allow time to institutions for overcoming shortcomings. The result of accreditation does not affect decisions on funding and other privileges to be given to an institution; it only determines whether a higher education institution (mostly private but in a few cases may be state higher learning institution) or a particular academic unit of it can function or it must be closed down. The decisions are not always correct and objective. Patronage from outside, unnecessary politicization attempts and corruption around accreditation – all of which are characteristic to transition countries – make things even more complicated. In my opinion, it would be possible to solve this problem if accreditation was done by independent public accreditation agencies, which are not subordinated to the government or any other higher agency, jointly with professional associations in various fields of arts and sciences. Participation of appropriate international institutions and foreign experts in these accreditation commissions would also contribute greatly. Specialists educated abroad and their alumnae type of associations too can play an important role in this. On the other hand, it is possible to use services of regional accreditation institutions, based joint activities with some neighboring and other countries, also including European ones. Within the framework of the Bologna Process and creation of European Higher Education Area, it is envisaged to create Pan-European accreditation agencies and to give right to higher education institutions functioning in the European education area to apply to them for accreditation. It is not excluded that the role of certain pan-European and regional accreditation agencies may be increased and new ones may be created.

The main result of accreditation for a private university should be the right for that institution to apply for and receive credits or loans from the government on quite favorable conditions, and similar rights should be extended to that university's students as well. On the other hand, state universities, funded by the government, either are not subject to accreditation at all or their accreditation is only formal?! (See Georgia!)

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.

3. Networking

Establishment of broad cooperation networks inside the country, in the region and worldwide has become a necessity for the education institutions for the purpose of globalization and capacity-building. Consultations on the education policy, awarding joint degrees, twinning programs, and their accreditation can help with increasing quality of education to some extent. This networking activity also plays an important role in strengthening autonomy of an education institution and decreasing its dependence on the government.

4. Role of students

Students should be given a role in the management of a higher education institution and enhancing quality of education. Inclusion of student organizations in the university and faculty

councils, systematic study of the students' opinion on instructors and subjects through anonymous student polls and the like are the ways that bring about certain degree of participation of students in the decision-making process.

5. Financing and Quality Evaluation

Let us touch upon another issue with regard to financing education. Direct financing of public education institutions by the state does not serve the purpose of development of higher education institutions on a competitive basis. All public higher education institutions get their "share" regardless of the quality of their education. However, all interested parties would benefit if the state financed not higher education institutions but the students who received high scores in the State Admission Test and if these students were allowed to use these funds to study at a higher education institution of their own choice. In this case, the state would be able to distribute funds more fairly without increasing them and higher education institutions would strive for increasing quality of their education in order to attract holders of state scholarships. In this way of distribution, private education institutions too would indirectly get the chance to receive from the state some financial assistance they deserve. In turn, prospective students with low financial opportunities would not be forced to get free but low-quality education, and would be able to study at their own chosen institution.

The ways for solution of these and many other important problems should be envisaged in the country's Law on Education. Unfortunately, as some provisions of the Law on Education promulgated in 1992 have been recently frozen and some other provisions are outdated, education in the country is based not on law but on lobbying and interpersonal relations. Maybe this is not a tragedy. But from the perspective of formulating our education policy, it is important to consider broadly and deeply the changing world and modern tendencies in organization of scientific and teaching activities while drafting and promulgating the law.

6. Access to higher education, admission policy and knowledge evaluation

Access to higher education has become one of the most serious problems. There is a gap between general (secondary, high) and higher education. Low quality of teaching at secondary schools as well as material and especially, moral erosion of schools renders it inevitable for students and parents to use service of private tutors. Private tutorship has become a spreading shadow industry.

In terms of the proportion of students in higher education from the relevant age group (18-24) Azerbaijan is far behind not only advanced countries, but also its former Soviet neighbors and from year to year this gap is becoming even bigger and bigger. According to the reports of the State Commission for Student Admission, beginning from 2002 number of individuals applying for admission has been rising, but the admission plan has been decreasing (It must be noted that in Azerbaijan the government every year determines appropriate majors and the number of students to be admitted to appropriate departments not only for public but also for private universities). Even this admission plan is not completely fulfilled due to certain shortcomings in admission principles. Thousands of applicants with higher test scores are left out and thousand others with lower test scores receive admission. Those left out despite high test scores apply to private education institutions for admission, but the government does not permit private education institutions to admit them (?) – the main reason of this is extreme centralization in the issue of admission.

Maybe, quality, content and form of education do not satisfy the state? True, quality of higher education in the country is not so high and unfortunately, the scale of corruption in education is not low. However, we also have certain higher education institutions that are absolutely free from corruption and are exemplary in terms of the form and substance of education, and with high reputation inside as well as outside the country. But it is one of the biggest paradoxes of our days that student admission is decreased exactly to these higher education institutions. It would be more logical, taking also into account the international experience, if the state appealed to higher education institutions providing quality education (and free from corruption), saying “admit more students” (and if the state extended certain assistance to them).

The State Commission for Student Admission does its work professionally, and I deem it necessary to acknowledge this. The shortcomings we discuss (as well as those we don't discuss) here are caused by incompleteness and unsystematic nature of the education policy. Organization of student admission and knowledge evaluation appropriately and seriously are only a part, i.e. technical part, of the story. The trouble is in admission, and in general, in education policy, and this problem is becoming more and more apparent. Thus, without a clear vision, we wander to the left and right and sometimes even go the reverse way – back. With minor exceptions, what we call educational reforms today are not so profound and consider neither the international nor our own, in many cases, bitter, experience.

7. Evaluation by Foreign Countries on Azerbaijani institutions

Attitudes of foreign countries on the Azerbaijani higher education institutions are not simple and differ from each other. As Russia is very familiar with this region and knows internal environment

here well, it has not undertaken any initiative to influence the education system, neither positively nor negatively. At the same time Russia does support branches of Russian universities in Azerbaijan, which are not recognized by the Azerbaijani government and undoubtedly are of poor quality. Authorized agencies of Turkey (YÖK) and Iran (Ministry of Research and Education) mainly pursue controversial policies in the recognition of Azerbaijani higher education institutions and their academic programs, namely, by discriminating certain institutions and favoring others. Instead of taking into consideration quality of education, presence or absence of corruption and other important indicators, they act in accordance with their personal acquaintances and linkages and/or in line with the will of Azerbaijani officials. One country that evaluates the education system of the region relatively well by impartially determining who is who and acting accordingly is the United States of America, which also is ahead of European countries in this sense.

8. Khazar University, Baku, Azerbaijan

The first private university in Azerbaijan, Khazar University (one of the first in the former Soviet Union) 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 (Khazar is the name of Caspian in Middle Eastern languages). Applying American-style credit accumulation model and offering programs leading to bachelor, master and PhD degrees since its establishment in Mart 18, 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 and credit accumulation system. 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).

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.

Khazar University has been a pioneer in Azerbaijan in prioritizing the nourishing of relations with industries as an integral part of its development. These help the university to uphold the quality of its programs, faculty, support services and students.

9. Black gold and human gold

Azerbaijan is a rich oil and gas country. The endowments existing under the ground can provide opportunities for welfare on the ground. High literacy rate of the population inherited from the socialist times, existence of convenient climatic and agricultural zones in the country, as well as, the role of the country as “East of West”, “West of East”, “North of South” and “South of North” can give an impetus to the country’s rapid development. It is not surprising that Azerbaijan is the leading country in the world in terms of GDP increase (approximately 30% in 2006). At present, emphasizing the role of oil (that is, the “black gold”) wealth in human development, the government has initiated a state program called “Converting black gold into human gold”. The program also covers development of education, within the framework of which a scholarship program for training Azerbaijani citizens abroad and in the country, is underway. It is also important to prepare a loan or credit program for Azerbaijani citizens who want to study,

especially, for those who strive to get quality education at paid education institutions in Azerbaijan. On the other hand, the strategy for development of education should include not only individual scholarships for students, but also institutional grants, to be given on a competitive basis, for funding cooperation and partnership programs between Azerbaijani and foreign education institutions.

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