Strengthening integrity and combatting corruption in higher education in Armenia

Conference Report
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Introduction

The Strengthening Integrity and Combating Corruption in Higher Education in Armenia Project is funded by the European Union and the Council of Europe under the Partnership Co-operation Framework in the Eastern Partnership Countries for 2015-2017. The overall objective of the project is to strengthen integrity and combat corruption in the higher education system of the Republic of Armenia by supporting the development of prevention and integrity mechanisms for practicing professionals and increasing good governance in the field of higher education in Armenia. The project has a special value being a first project in education of the Council of Europe office in Armenia.

The conference took place in Tsaghkadzor on November 16 and 17 2015. It gathered 100 participants – from representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science of Armenia, Ministry of Justice, civil society organizations, universities, to student representatives etc.

The conference was opened by Ms Karine Harutyunyan, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education and Science of Armenia and welcoming speeches given by Mr Armen Ashotyan, Minister of Education and Science of Armenia, H.E. Ambassador Piotr Antoni Switalski, Head of the European Union Delegation to the Republic of Armenia and Ms Naira Avetisyan, Deputy Head of Office of the Council of Europe office in Yerevan. The welcoming speeches repeated the strong political will for implementing effective measures and serious reform efforts in combating corruption in higher education in Armenia. They emphasized the need to move forward from simple declarations to concrete action plans by reducing risks and addressing challenges and this conference aimed at providing possible directions.

Ms Katia Dolgova-Dreyer and Ms Liana Amirbekyan from Council of Europe presented the project objectives, themes and expected results. The project gathers Ministry of Education and Science but also Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Armenia, university staff and students from both private and public higher education institutions, and civil society organisations. It aims to develop a model Code of Ethics for academic professionals and students of higher education institutions; to develop toolkits to enhance transparency and accountability and set of recommendations for reform and legal framework, including implementation of a number of training sessions, workshops, conferences, awareness raising activities and peer-to-peer study visits. Important outcomes of the project that have already been accomplished, among others, are drafting of the Risk Analysis of Issues Affecting the Integrity of the Armenian Higher Education System and the ongoing revision of

the draft Law on Higher Education. The vivid discussion on the project and its approaches provided an excellent introduction into the following one day and a half of fruitful exchanges.

The report will outline here all the presentations, discussions and conclusions through a thematic structure. We will start by summarizing the understanding of the concepts of integrity and corruption, by the participants of the conference, following a short outline of the most pertinent and immediate challenges of the specific Armenian context. Further on, we will summarize the challenges that integrity and corruption are posing all over the European Higher Education Area. Last, though maybe the most important, chapter will focus on the possible steps forward as perceived by three groups of stakeholders: academic staff, students and quality assurance institutions.

Understanding Integrity and Corruption

Professor Ian K. Smith, Professor of Education at the School of Education, University of the West of Scotland, presented in his keynote presentation, the main framework of Council of Europe on combating corruption: the Council of Europe's Pan-European Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (ETINED)[1], being developed since 2014. The work of ETINED follows the principle based approach. Two main documents produced are 'Ethical Principles for Education' (relying more on beliefs and values) and 'Ethical Behaviour of All Actors in Education' (representing ethical rules and principles of professional practice). In implementation, those two documents should be brought together, as prof. Smith explained. Certainly, Council of Europe's work is building on a number of other statements and documents including IAU and Magna Charta Observatory 2012 guidelines for an institutional code of ethics; etc. All those documents should serve as 'background source documents' and as such inspire further action.

Professor Smith underlined that it is necessary to move beyond anti-corruption 'mechanistic' regulatory measures and the whole of society needs to commit to positive ethical principles. ETINED documents cover all main actors in education and emphasize the principle of 'public responsibility'.
Those actors, relevant for higher education, are:
Academic staff (understood as inspiring academic leaders who are setting example for integrity promotion)
Students (regarded as full adult members of their HE communities and independent of parental involvement)

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[1] www.coe.int/etined

Parents/guardians/care givers/carers of students (outside of inappropriate interference)

HEI administrative staff and management

Relevant public officials, and

Political leaders and representatives of broader civil society.

Contextualizing – Higher Education challenges in Armenia

Ms Karine Harutyunyan, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Education and Science in Armenia presented a general overview of the Armenian situation. She recalled that there are two existing documents: Risk analysis of issues affecting the integrity of the Armenian higher education system, prepared by Prof. Ian Smith and Mr Tom Hamilton (April 2015) and Anticorruption Strategy of the Republic of Armenia and its implementation plan for 2015-2018, adopted by the Government of Armenia (folllowed with several other legal texts) providing basis for the action. With the Government's new action plan, education became a priority. Several legal texts have already been drafted, including secondary legislation. A number of issues were enumerated as priorities: admission exams; professional development and training (including assessment) of academic staff; accreditation of higher education institutions; public awareness; introduction of computer based tests (CBTs); etc. Introduction of an efficient system of funding could highly influence the corruption tendencies, as well as development and implementation of quality assurance. Transparency of the system plays a significant role and the Ministry is introducing a number of tools and information systems to improve transparency and visibility, such as registration of all diplomas and certificates and publishing of reports of the inspectorate, among others. A number of higher education institutions are also teaching courses on corruption and its prevention.

The main goal of the Ministry is to ensure quality education for every citizen based on his/her education and interests, regardless of their age or socio-economic status. In order to achieve this, the corruption risks need to be minimized.

Looking at the Armenian context from a perspective of a higher education institution, Vice rector of Yerevan State University, Ruben Markosyan, gave us an insight into the implementation of the new Anticorruption Strategy and its implementation plan for 2015-2018. Yerevan State University included anticorruption into its internal strategy. Markosyan inquired why academic staff show such high negative attitudes towards treatment of anticorruption issues and whether this should reinforce the idea that anti corruption activities in HE in Armenia should be implemented top down. As a second biggest challenge, Markosyan emphasized students' attitudes and perceptions. The most pertinent

issue remains changing the value system and making the paradigm shift in understanding academic integrity as the highest value. Higher education institutions should develop their anti corruption programs including the development of Code of Ethics and provide incentives for further research on corruption issues. Along with the increase of transparency and accountability, Markosyan emphasized also the funding issues and reforms in human resources management.

Common challenges, common solutions

Through the presentation of experiences of corruption and regulatory measures for ensuring transparency in education by Klemen Miklavič, Higher education policy professional and associate researcher at Centre for Educational Policy Studies, University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, we had an opportunity to identify the biggest challenges that higher education sector is facing all over Europe and the world. Massification of higher education which is introducing a strongly diversified student body brings us a set of new issues. Miklavič repeated the need for further research in the field so better assessment of the situation could be produced. Lack of quality culture, lack of qualified teaching staff, deficient quality assurance and accreditation procedures all pose threat to academic integrity.

Today we are facing a rise in for profit higher education institutions, drop of public budgets for higher education and systems with a considerable share of private HEIs. As a result, the relationship between professors and students changes and external sources of funding neglect the pedagogical aspects of higher education. In the race for international recognition, HEIs are facing pressure from a number of ranking mechanisms, which potentially leads to lowering of (research) quality standards.

Miklavič reminded us that the approach to facing those challenges needs to be both top down and bottom up. All the regulations and mechanisms need to take into account the local culture and values, beliefs and tradition of the community in question, while the international community can serve only as a facilitator in the process.

Professor Aleksa Bjeliš, former Rector of the University of Zagreb in Croatia, gave a perspective on global challenges from university management. Bjeliš emphasized the need for prevention – in the sense of application of a proactive approach in the aim of establishing positive values in the academic community, but also the whole society. Principles of academic integrity, equity, justice, fairness and non-discrimination need to be implemented in all academic activities. Decision making processes are expected to be accountable and transparent. Institutional autonomy and academic freedom should

remain the highest values. All the HEI level regulations should assure the detailed procedures, recognizing the difference between ethical and disciplinary issues, while criminal issues remain in the authority of national and international legislation and judiciary bodies. Through a number of examples and cases, Bjeliš explained the possible solutions and procedures of how to tackle corruption and integrity issues at universities.

Looking at the students' perspective, Ms Lea Meister, Vice-Chairperson of the European Students' Union presented the students' struggle for academic integrity and anti corruption measures. Students perceive as crucial the questions of quality of education (including Student Centred Learning) and transparency of decision making processes, which involve students at all levels and in all segments. ESU participates in a number of projects aiming to advance those issues: ESPAQ – Enhancing Students' Participation in Quality Assurance in Armenia (TEMPUS); PASCL – Peer Assessment of Student Centred Learning (LLL); QUEST – Quest for quality for students (LLL); Quality Assurance Pool: Training and Exchange; Student Centred Learning Pool: Training and Exchange etc. Meister underlined the importance of social dimension and issues of access and support to students, as inevitable questions influencing academic integrity and anti corruption combat. Active and well supported, as much as well trained, students take responsibility for quality education and together with the rest of the academic community can combat corruption. Importance of student activism was also shown through the presentation of Ms Mary Hayrapetyan, from Armenian National Student Association, in which she talked about the study ANSA implemented under the name "Bologna with Student Eyes" with the support of OSCE office in Yerevan.

After the introduction given by Professor Ian K. Smith, the participants divided in three groups and considered possible pathways of actions for three groups of stakeholders: academic staff, students and quality assurance institutions.

What next? Academic staff

Discussing further steps for the academic community, in the workshop led by Professor Aleksa Bjeliš, the participants agreed on the following most important issues:
- Implementation of existing regulations – often, the legal frameworks are already drafed and adopted, they just need to be implemented.

- Incentives and sanctions(evaluations) - serious deliberations need to result in clear proposals for both incentives to combat corruption and sanctions through the evaluation of academic staff for any corrupted or corruptive actions.
- Prestige and recognition – should be the values the academic community of an institution is aiming for and as such incentives for quality enhancement and combating corruption.
- Academic integrity – ethic committees' legitimacy is essential.
- Models of ethical behavior – the prevention measure should, within awareness raising campaigns, stress more good practice examples and promote good models of the academic community in question.
- Employment contracts – should be clearly linked with the measures against corruption and including sanctions for corrupted/corruptive behaviour.
- Confidentiality of procedures – is crucial for establishing trust within the academic community when dealing with sensitive issues of corruption and integrity.
- Size of HEI – can determine the type of measures to be taken as it strongly influences the dynamics of interinstitutional relations.

What next? Students

In the workshop facilitated by Klemen Miklavič and Lea Meister, students raised following issues:

- Identification of roots of corrupted behaviours – socio-economic situation might be among leading causes of corrupted behaviours, but certainly further research is needed.
- Assessment practices – were cited as one of the most plausible situations that can be of high risk for corruption.
- Naming and shaming – reputation – along with the rest of the efforts for the paradigm shift; students repeated the importance of transparency of reputation of both students and academic staff. In the change of culture, knowledge needs to be understood as the central value in education.
- Uniform procedures at all universities (ethic committees) – students perceived to be crucial to have uniform procedures at all higher education institutions in a country so transparency of procedures would be easily achieved and students would be better informed about their rights and possible ways to act.

- Student Anti Corruption Network – student ombudspersons – it should be reconsidered if some special student bodies could be organized in order to increase students' participation in the anti corruption combat.

What next? Quality Assurance

The workshop on the role of Quality Assurance in increasing the transparency and integrity in higher education, moderated by Anushavan Makaryan and Lilit Zakaryan from ANQA, further conclusions were brought:

- Accreditation criteria and internal QA measures (self-evaluation) – play a key role in quality enhancement of higher education.
- Accountability – is a central value of higher education institutions, inseparable from institutional autonomy.
- Resources – Quality Assurance centers should exist and have access to resources at all higher education institutions.
- Risk: bureaucratization of the process – it should be carefully avoided not to introduce too many strict regulations that would rather overburden the process and thus render it ineffective but rather ensure that procedures and sanctions in place are clear, simple and same for everyone.
- Main aims should be to eradicate plagiarism; make evaluation (assessment) system corruption free and change the culture paradigm.

As the conference left a number of questions yet to be elaborated and further discussed in the future course of the project, it has also established the ground rules for the course of action: the need for participation of all relevant stakeholders, a clear regulatory framework within which can Armenian higher education operate, agreement on the burning need for a shift in cultural paradigm and most importantly, the consensus that we should not combat corruption but we should all cooperate against corruption.