

**HIGHER EDUCATION IN ARMENIA: FACTORS INFLUENCING ARMENIANS TO  
VALUE HIGHER EDUCATION**

**by**

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## **Introduction**

Education is a universal value that is appreciated worldwide. People of different ages, genders, nationalities, religions, social statuses emphasize the importance of education despite their different backgrounds and beliefs.

Higher education is an essential part of one's career path and very often higher education is the means of becoming professionally successful. However, today, people do not continue with their studies in higher educational institutions in order to become an expert or scholar of a certain field, but because they want to occupy themselves after graduating from high schools and universities.

Especially in countries like Armenia, that are not economically developed, higher education plays an important role in forming the social structure of the country and more importantly, people's general satisfaction rate of their lives.

In spite of having a small population, only 3.000.000, Armenia has more than 65 higher educational institutions that are currently operating and on average, each has more than 2000 enrolled students. Most of these higher educational institutions are private, and only the small amount are public institutions. It becomes clear that the state support for higher educational institutions is not enough, so Armenians living in the country and also in the Diaspora have opened private institutions in Armenia. Thus the funding of these private higher educational institutions mostly comes either from Diaspora Armenians or businessmen and other public figures from Armenia.

Despite the inefficient support from the Government, Armenians are more likely to continue with their studies in higher educational institutions, rather than going to community colleges or simply starting to work.

This phenomenon is not new and did not start with the independence of Armenia and the establishment of Republic of Armenia. When Armenia was a part of the Soviet Union, the tendency of continuing studies in higher educational institutions was common amongst Armenians. People would rather spend considerable amounts of money on sending their children to study in higher educational institutions, than invest that money or find a different use for it. Receiving academic degrees was more of a prestige than a start of a career. That tradition remained after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Armenians still are very eager for their children to get academic degrees. Another phenomenon with a large amount of student enrollment rate in Armenia is that certain professions are extremely popular, and the rest of the faculties have almost no students. This explains why most students choose to get academic degrees not in fields that they would want, or that may have more prospects for the future careers, but rather in fields popular among the general public. This raises the question of how parents, relatives or friends may influence a person's choice in deciding a field for a career and not going to higher educational institutions that they would want to, or choosing professions that appeal the most to them.

## Literature Review

Education is known to be a great strength that people possess. Especially in countries like Armenia, that are small and not influential, education is a tool that helps people claim about themselves in spheres like Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Engineering, Medicine, Literature, etc. Armenians are very proud of their educational and scientific achievements. Therefore, education in Armenia is always a topic of people's discussions and concerns.

Trends in the sphere of global education change people's perceptions of higher education. Education in the twenty first century has been innovative. Overflow of new information, scientific findings, technology development could not certainly skip the sphere of higher education. According to the data included in the UNESCO 2009 report, student enrollment in higher educational institutions increased compared with year 2000. These changes in enrollment rates are directly connected to the geographical, economic and social aspects of a country, thus student enrollment rates differ in developing and developed countries.

“There are some 150.6 million tertiary students globally, roughly a 53% increase over 2000” (UNESCO, 2009). However, this 53% increase is not distributed among developed and developing countries equally. According to the UNESCO report the increase in student enrollment rate in higher educational institutions in low-income countries was only 2% from 2000 to 2007.

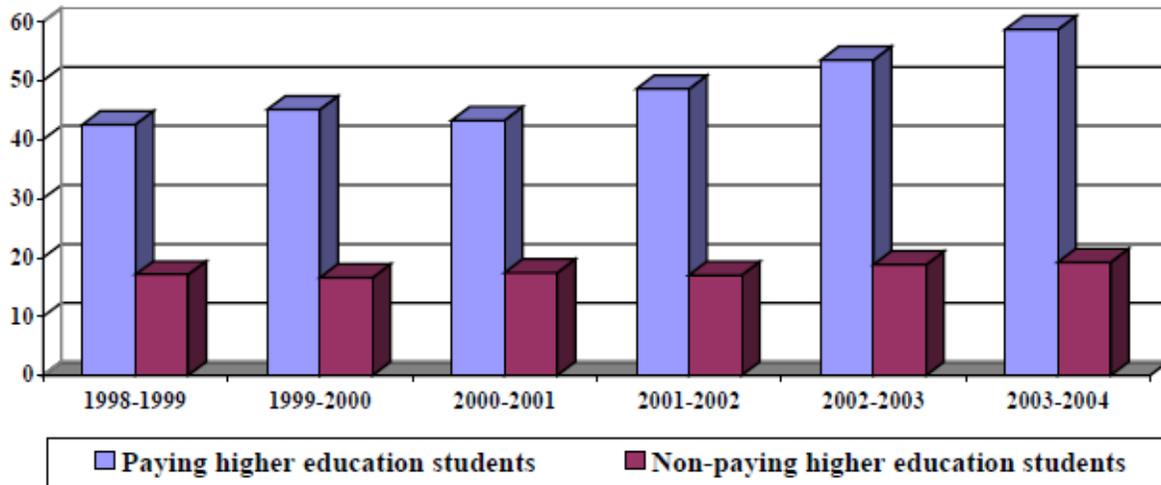
In this statistical data, what is the increase rate of student enrollment in Armenia? As a developing country, it would be logical to think that the tertiary enrollment in Armenia has not increased drastically. However, according to Aslanyan's article “Basic Trends in the Development of Professional Higher Education in Armenia”, the increase rate of student

enrollment in higher educational institutions is nearly 38%. Clearly there is difference between the enrollment in tertiary education in Armenia and other developing countries.

Aslanyan also mentions in her report that the increase of student enrollment rate in Armenia is not equally distributed among different degrees Armenian universities offer. In fact, the number of students enrolled in industrial, agricultural and medical departments of higher educational institutions decreased compared to 2000, from 15.9% to 8.1% (Industry), 3.5% to 3.3% (Agriculture) and 9.4% to 7.8% (Health). Whereas, the number of students enrolled in professions in Economy, Jurisprudence and Pedagogy increased, 19.1% to 24.3% (Economy), 2.9% to 3.5% (Jurisprudence), and 13.2% to 16.5% (Pedagogy).

Of course, it is natural that professions having high demand change constantly, accompanied by changes in the economy, government policies, and other outside factors.

Besides the increase in student enrollment rates in higher educational institutions, the number of students who pay for studying in universities has increased, as well. Even though most of the higher educational institutions in Armenia are run by state, the whole financing of these institutions is not done by the state. This brings up a problem of having very few full scholarships provided to Armenian students. That is why most students enrolled in higher educational institutions have to pay whole tuition fees. According to Aslanyan, from 1998-2004 the number of students paying for their studies increased to 79%, and in the total number of students 12.6%.



As the graph reprinted from Aslanyan's article shows, the number of students paying their tuition fees increased from 1998 to 2004, whereas the number of non-paying students has not changed much since 1998.

In such cases the state should provide the paying students with possible solutions, like government loans, or a certain amount of decrease in the tuition fee based on specific factors, such as academic merit, financial need. However, these kinds of possibilities are not offered to students in Armenia. The public universities are not flexible in terms of student payments, especially in case of late payments most public higher educational institutions of Armenia have certain policies that do not let students who are having difficulties with making payments, take midterm or final exams, and very often these students simply have to drop out of universities. On the other hand, a few private higher educational institutions of Armenia, such as the French University or the American University of Armenia have policies that allow students to make late payments. Moreover, American University offers two types of scholarships, based on academic achievements and based on financial needs of students.

Regardless of difficulties referring to tuition fees payments, the student enrollment rate in higher educational institutions does not seem to fall; on the contrary it increases every year. As mentioned in the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency's report on Higher Education in Armenia, during academic years 2010-2011, there were 111 003 students enrolled in higher educational institutions of Armenia, 91 404 of which enrolled in public institutions and 19 599 students enrolled in private institutions. In 2010-2011 the total population of Armenia was 3 018 854 people, meaning that 3.7% of the whole population of Armenia were students enrolled in higher educational institutions. Compared to two other neighbor countries of the South Caucasus region, Georgia and Azerbaijan, the rate of student enrollment in higher educational institutions in Armenia is higher. According to European Commission's report on Higher Education in Georgia, during the same academic period, 2010-2011, 99 003 students were enrolled in higher educational institutions of Georgia, which is the 2.2% of the total population of the country (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, National Tempus Office Georgia). The same report by the European Commission done in Azerbaijan, shows that 141 697 people were enrolled in higher educational institutions of Azerbaijan, which is 1.5 % of the total population of the country (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, National Tempus Office Azerbaijan).

The aforementioned statistical data proves that the student enrollment rates in higher educational institutions of Armenia are higher compared to the other two countries in the region. However, the annually spend money on the educational system of the country is lower than in the two neighboring countries. The Armenian Government spends 2.5% of its GDP on education. According to UNICEF Country Profile, Armenia has the lowest spending on education in the

South Caucasus region. The Georgian Government spends 3.2% of its GDP on education, and the Government of Azerbaijan spends 2.8% of its GDP on education.

Even though Armenian higher educational institutions do not have enough funding to cover all their expenses and provide scholarships for students, the quality of education offered in higher educational institutions of Armenia is rather satisfying. As mentioned in Higher Education in Armenia Today: a focused review, completed by the Open Society Foundation Armenia, “Armenia is an extraordinary reservoir of talent in the area of higher education.” Despite the good quality education in Armenia, people who graduate from Armenian state and private universities aim towards leaving the country and using their knowledge obtained in Armenian higher educational institutions outside of the country. According to the report done by Open Society Foundation Armenia, the tendency of moving out of the country after graduating from higher educational institutions creates a problem for Armenia, as a great percentage of educated people leave the country. Thus, a lack of professionals in different fields causes even more serious problems. As stated in the CEU report, the outflow of educated people is not only observed among university graduates, but also academics and other professionals, who make good careers abroad.

According to the CEU report, the Armenian education system has undergone many changes and reforms; however, it still has major problems such as being too much politicized, lacking authentic reformation system, etc. This report emphasizes the importance of an effective relationship between higher educational institutions and the development of an open and active society. Higher education in Armenia is an essential factor especially concerning the further socio-economic and political development of the country. The major problem is the outflow of educated people from the country. The recent changes and reforms, however, implemented in the

educational system do not tend to address this problem and decrease the emigration rates of educated people from Armenia.

According to the CEU report, problems in higher educational system of Armenia have not decreased after becoming a part of the Bologna European process of higher education, as many Armenians still believe that the current Government of the country should bring back traditions from Soviet educational systems. Thus, a conversation between higher educational institutions boards and external stakeholders of the system does not appear. The Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Armenia should work toward solving this major problem, and then addressing other issues in the system will be easier and more effective.

All the sources mentioned above are thoroughly organized analysis on the higher education system of Armenia. They point at the flaws, current situation of education in the country and possible developments in the sphere. However, all these sources provide information that is strictly based on numbers and percentages. With this project, not only statistical data will be used to find the reasons for Armenians appreciation of higher education, but students enrolled in higher educational institutions of Armenia will be interviewed, as well. The reason for these interviews and surveys is to talk to people and find out directly from them what reasons they have for applying to higher educational institutions and what makes them appreciate academic degrees. In addition, it will help explain the origins of the cultural phenomena of Armenians valuing education. It will also examine the impact of the Government's minimal financial involvement in the educational system and the lack of resources for Armenians pursuing higher education.

## Research Question

The project aims to answer the following main question: What major factors influence Armenians to continue their studies in higher educational institutions after completing high schools?

Statistics done by different international organizations, such as UNICEF, UNESCO and Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, show that the student enrollment rates in Armenia are comparatively higher than the rest of the region. This difference is based on economic and political factors, and also the collective ideology of Armenians about higher education. The project will address a few additional questions, as well, such as: How do other's opinions and the general public's thinking influence Armenians on choosing higher educational institutions, what Armenian students value in their universities, what they would like to see changed?

## Methodology

In order to understand and explain the phenomena of Armenians trying to receive higher educational degrees, previously collected scholarly data and statistics on higher educational institutions of Armenia, and the education system of the country, in general was used in this paper. In addition, online and print surveys among Armenian students were implemented. Also, I have conducted a semi-structured interview with the Director of Admissions' Office of American University of Armenia, Arina Zohrabian, to have a closer view on how higher education is generally regarded in Armenia, why prospective students choose AUA and what influences their decisions. The online surveys were targeted specifically at the students of the American University of Armenia. Print surveys were for other universities in Yerevan and one other region of Armenia, Lori. Asking students of other universities to complete print surveys has been more effective in terms of receiving responses from students who have different backgrounds and academic preferences.

The print surveys were distributed in Yerevan State University, Yerevan State Medical University and Vanadzor State University and also Vanadzor State Engineering University to ask students directly to complete the surveys. I find it important to have students outside of Yerevan participating in the surveys, as results in regions vary from results in Yerevan. As aforementioned, the other three universities I chose to implement the surveys are American University of Armenia, Yerevan State University and Yerevan State Medical University. American University of Armenia was chosen as it is rather new, especially the undergraduate program, which only launched in 2013, and finding out what features encourage students to choose AUA as a higher educational institution was interesting. Unlike AUA, Yerevan State

University has a long history of operating in Armenia, and people usually find it the most trustworthy higher educational institution. Yerevan State Medical University was selected to see why students choose careers in the medical field, as the format and the duration of studies in the Medical University are very different from other higher educational institutions.

50 online surveys and 110 printed surveys were completed. 160 surveys, in total, were enough to analyze specific questions concerning the decision-making patterns of further educational paths of Armenian students and also the influence of their parents on these decisions. Both the online and print surveys consisted of the same questions. There were ten questions on each survey, and the participants were asked to answer all the questions without any exceptions.

Two types of questions predominated on the surveys, multiple choice questions and open-ended questions. Students completing the surveys were asked questions similar to these: reasons for continuing studies after graduating from high school; factors influencing decisions; and intentions of leaving the country, once obtaining academic degrees. The complete survey can be found in Appendix A.

Of course, participating students were offered a few options as possible responses. They also had a chance for an alternative response, if they thought the answer that suited them was not in the given options.

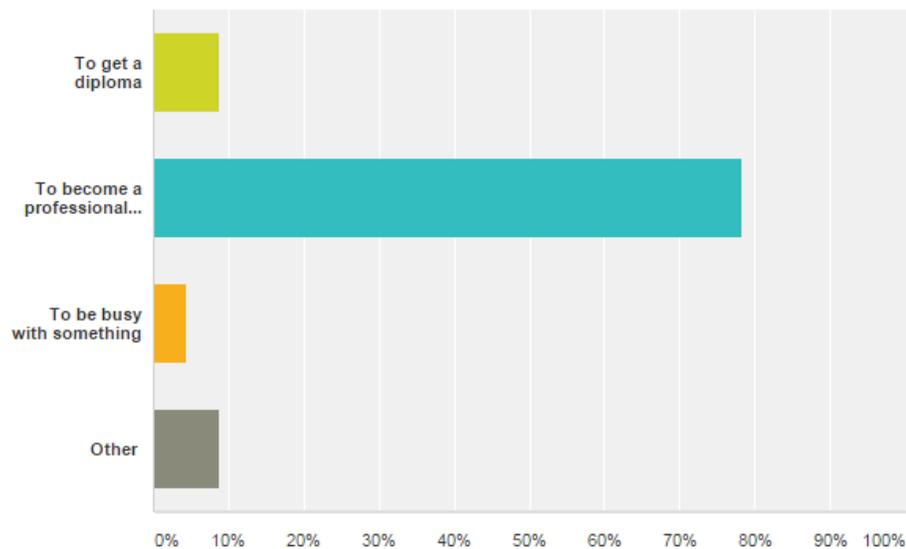
By these questions I found out why students participating in surveys decided to get an academic degree. I also tried to find out whether university students want to have academic degrees just as a kind of an “accessory” or they truly plan to become experts in their chosen fields and build professional careers based on their degrees from universities.

Another important finding, I came across with after analyzing the surveys is knowing whether students were influenced by their parents, friends, or other relatives to choose a specific university or a profession, and most importantly if they never wanted to continue their studies in higher educational institutions, but changed their minds because of somebody else recommended them otherwise. One other thing I hoped to find out was what factors influence students to choose specific universities and professions. I was interested in finding whether the survey participants see their professional careers in specific spheres, such as medical, engineering, business, pedagogy, linguistics, sciences, or they just go with the common flow and choose higher educational institutions based on modern tendencies, outside opinions, fees, professors or other factors. Moreover, analyzing students' opinions concerning some flaws or shortcomings in their universities was useful in determining whether Armenian higher educational institutions meet the expectations of their students, or not. I also, inquired whether or not conversations between students and the administration of universities take place, and if yes, do changes occur after hearing the students' concerns or problems.

By these last two questions, I tried to find out if administration systems of Armenian higher educational institutions are open to hearing their students and adjusting university policies to students' needs and expectations.

## Research Findings and Analysis

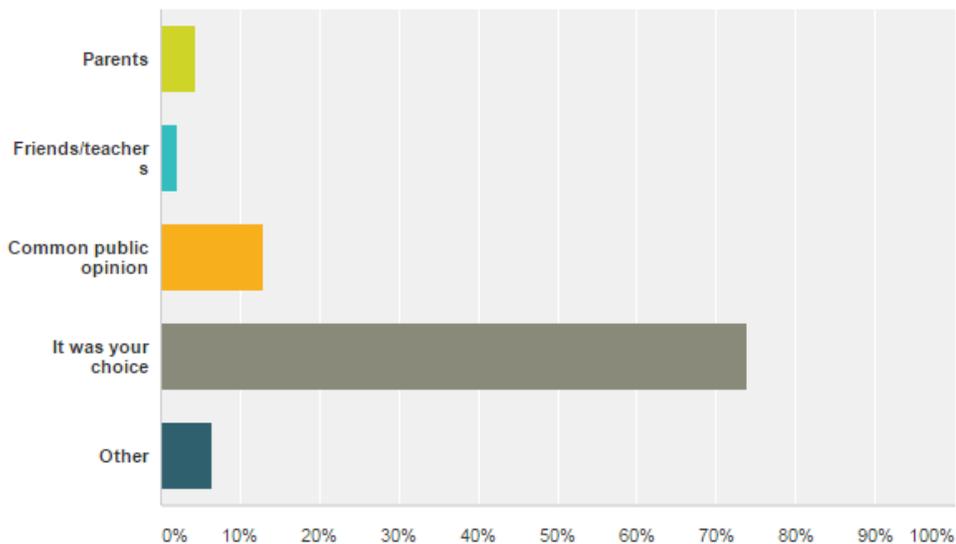
144 online and face to face surveys were conducted with students representing different higher educational institutions of Armenia. The questionnaires were formed to find out the main reasons why Armenians choose to study in higher educational institutions. The students were asked to mention why they have decided to study in a higher educational institution. To answer they were provided with four options, which were the following, for receiving a diploma, for becoming a professional in a certain field, for being occupied, and other. 78% of participants answered the main reason for choosing to study in a university was the goal of becoming a professional in a certain sphere. The participant students were rather honest in their answers as 4.3% of them said they chose to attend a university just to be busy with something. Even though the options were limited to three certain choices and one *Other* option, almost 9% of students asked offered their own reasons for applying to higher



(Figure 1: Reasons, Online Survey)

educational institutions. Among the answers provided by participants were “to earn more money”, “to become educated”, and “to use and develop skills in order to become a professional in a certain field”.

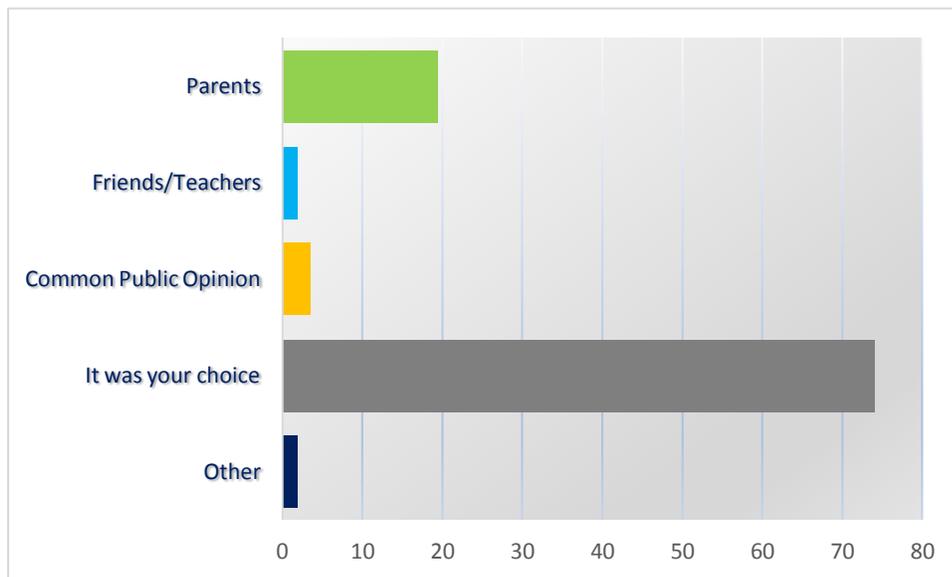
One of the initial questions addressed through this survey was to find out who or what factors influence and motivate Armenians to apply and study in higher educational institutions. The questionnaire was formed in a way to see what are the major factors influencing people’s decisions. Students were offered five different options, such as influence by parents, teachers/friends, common public opinion, students’ own decisions and an option of *Other*. As an answer to this particular question the majority of participants, 72%, said they were not influenced by parents or common public opinion, and it was their own decision and their own choice to apply to a university. (See Figure 2)



(Figure 2: Influence, Online Survey)

As aforementioned, both online and face to face surveys were conducted with Armenian students. The results of online surveys are similar with the ones of face to face surveys for the

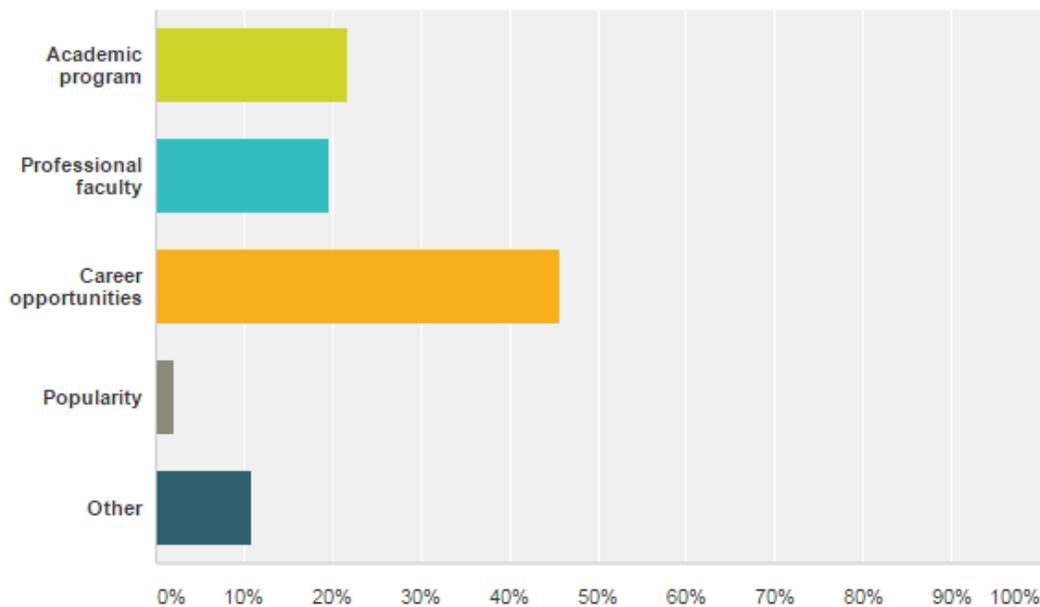
majority of variables. One of the major differences between the online and face to face surveys is how students replied to the question of what or who influenced their decision of applying to a higher educational institution. If 73% of the participants of the online survey claimed that they made a decision of applying to a university on their own, and only 4.3% of the students said their parents' influence was significant on choosing to get an academic degree, then, face to face survey participants' replies look rather different. (See Figure 3)



(Figure 3: Influence, Face to face survey)

According to the results of face to face surveys, 74% of students said that they made their own decisions of applying to universities. However, unlike the online survey results, in this case 19% of students who were asked, claimed their parents' influence was significant in terms of deciding whether to apply to a higher educational institution. It is interesting how male students mentioned their families and parents influenced their decisions a lot. Usually, compared to females, males are freer and more independent in decisions they make. However, as it turns out

from survey results, Armenian males trust their families in deciding where to study and what qualification to obtain. Prospective students and their parents choose higher educational institutions based on several factors, such as the professional faculty of the institution, the academic program, further career opportunities, popularity of a certain institution, etc. In order to find out what are the major factors Armenians consider while choosing a higher educational institution, such a question was included in the online and face to face surveys. From the surveys, it became clear that 46% of the students chose to study in certain higher educational institutions for further career opportunities. (See Figure 4)



(Figure 4: Reasons for Choosing a Specific Higher Educational Institution. Online Surveys)

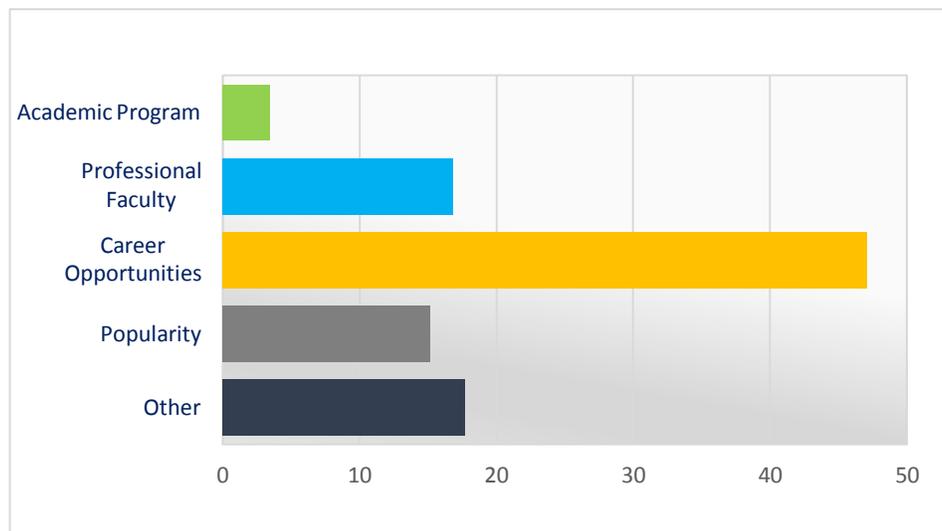
As the majority of online survey respondents were current students of American University of Armenia (AUA), it was reasonable to find out what factors influenced their opinions to choose AUA as a higher educational institution that fits their professional interests

and career prospects the best. Thus, with the intention to implement further research, a semi-structured interview was conducted with Director of Admissions of AUA, Arina Zohrabian. Ms. Zohrabian stated there was no research conducted to find out why Armenians choose AUA to study and obtain an academic degree from AUA. However, she mentioned that the high quality education provided in the university, library capacities, computer laboratories and other opportunities are key factors influencing people's decisions in applying to the American University of Armenia. All the aforementioned factors were among additional responses that online survey respondents mentioned as factors influencing their choice of a higher educational institution in Armenia.

According to Ms. Zohrabian, the Office of Admissions at AUA works hard to introduce the university and its capacities not only to prospective students from Armenia, but also Diaspora Armenians. Armenians living abroad become familiarized with the academic program that AUA offers and can apply to AUA if they plan to come back to Armenia. Of course, the number of Armenians coming back from abroad to study and live in Armenia is not that high, but these students are certainly important in shaping two-way communication between Armenia and the Diaspora.

The face to face surveys conducted in several higher educational institutions of Yerevan and Vanadzor demonstrate how responses can differ among students of not only different universities, but also two different cities. It is important to note that participants of face to face surveys from higher educational institutions of Vanadzor found that faculties of universities had more influence on their decisions than academic programs offered by local universities. Only 3.3% of participants of face to face surveys replied that their decisions on choosing a university were influenced by the academic programs of these universities. Faculty, on the other hand, was

an important factor that influenced many students to choose particular institutions for pursuing higher education. 16.8% of students said they made their choices of universities based on faculties of these higher educational institutions. It is interesting how both online and face to face surveys have very similar results for the option of further job opportunities influencing participants' decisions. From Figure 4, it becomes clear that 46% of participants of online surveys said further job opportunities influenced their university choice. 47% of participants of face to face surveys also said their decisions were influenced by this particular factor. Popularity, on the other hand, is one of the factors that influences prospective students and their choices of a higher educational institution. 17% of face to face survey participants said they chose a particular university for its popularity. However, only 2% of online survey participants said it was the case with them.



(Figure 5: Face to face surveys; Choice of University)

In 2010-2011 the 3.7% of the whole population of Armenia were students enrolled in higher educational institutions (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2012). According to the Caucasus Research website, the 2015 Armenia dataset indicates that 41% of

Armenian population were people aged 18-35. If 18-21 year olds are separated from the age group 18-35, it will become clear that almost 10% of Armenian population is aged 18-21, and 3.7% are students. This information suggests that around 35% of 18-21 year olds pursue higher education.

On the other hand, the state-provided scholarships are few, meaning the majority of students studying at Armenian higher educational institutions pay the tuition fees by themselves, without any help from the Government. University fees start from 300.000AMD and reach 1.000.000AMD in state universities. In American University of Armenia and Yerevan Branch of Lomonosov Moscow State University tuition fees are even higher, reaching 1.750.000AMD.

As a result of conducted online and face to face surveys in several Armenian higher educational institutions, it turned out 61% of students enrolled in these institutions do not have scholarships from their universities or the Government. In Figure 6, the distribution of students who are provided with scholarships and the ones who do not receive any kind of scholarships can be easily noticed.

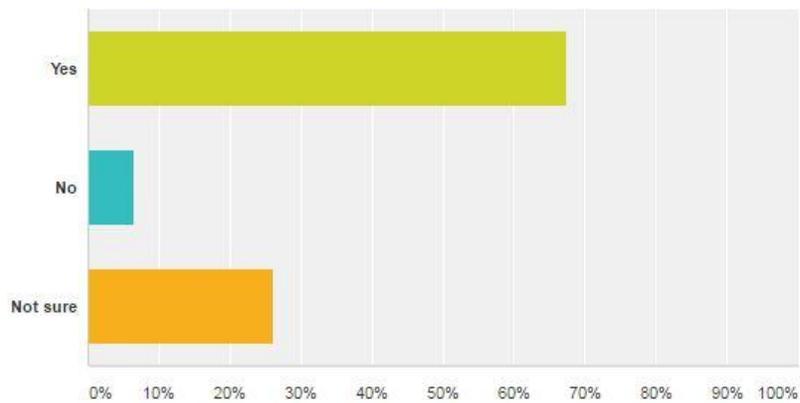


(Figure 6: Face to Face Surveys; University Scholarships)

In the case of face to face survey results, the picture continues to remain the same. 60% of participants said they do not receive any scholarships from their universities or the Government. 40% of participants said they are provided with scholarships.

The higher fees of higher educational institutions and the lack of state provided scholarships do not prevent Armenians from applying to universities and continuing their studies in higher educational institutions. In fact, most participants of online and face to face surveys mentioned their intentions of continuing studies after obtaining Bachelor's Degrees.

According to the results of online surveys, 68% of students said they plan to continue their studies after completing their four-year studies and obtaining a Bachelor's Degree.



(Figure 7: Online Surveys; Postgraduate Education)

As demonstrated in Figure 7, approximately 70% of survey participants said they plan to continue their studies and obtain Master's Degrees. In Table 6 it can be easily seen that only 40% of participants of surveys said they have scholarships covering their tuition fees. The rest of the participants, 60% have no financial support from the Government or other organizations. In Aslanyan's article, a graph demonstrates how the number of paying and non-paying higher

education students increased from 1998 to 2004, becoming 60% instead of the previous 40% (Aslanyan, 2005).

### Correlation of Continuing Studies and Scholarships



(Figure 8: Face to face survey; Continuing with Studies Correlation with Scholarships)

The two pie-charts above show the percentages of online and face to face survey respondents who plan to continue with their studies after obtaining a Bachelor’s degree, or to limit their studies by graduating from a higher educational institution. The first pie-chart demonstrates number of respondents who do have a scholarship covering their tuition fees, and who do plan to continue with their studies. The second pie-chart demonstrates the number of survey participants who do not have scholarships covering their tuition expenses, but they still plan to continue with their studies after obtaining a higher academic degree. According to the second chart, 45% of survey participants who do not have any kind of scholarships covering their tuition fees do plan to go on with their studies. The other 45% of respondents with no scholarships are not certain about their plans of continuing with higher education, however they did not answer “no” either. This data shows that even without any financial support from the Government or universities, Armenians value higher education. The higher rate of “*Not Sure*”

responses demonstrates how Armenians would be willing to pursue higher education if they had the financial support from the Government or other organizations.

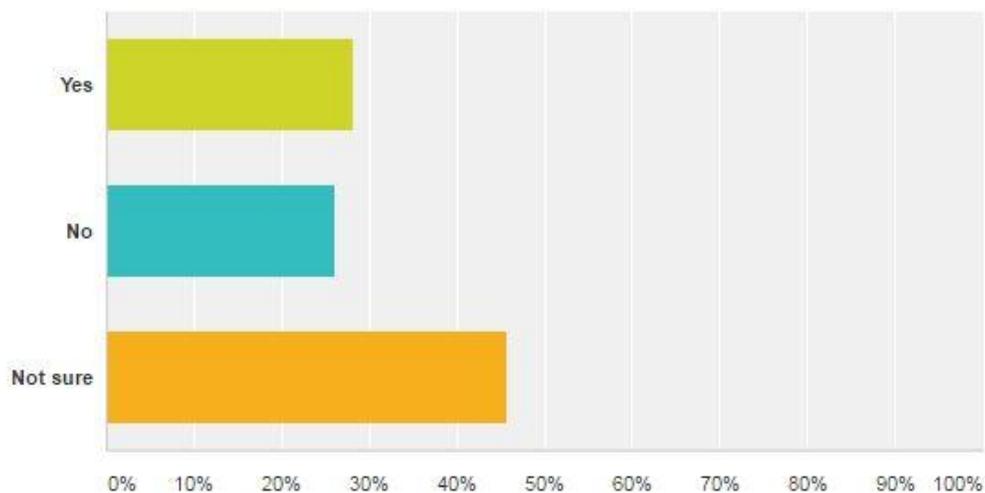
Despite the good quality of education in Armenia, people who graduate from Armenian state and private universities plan to leave the country. According to Open Society Foundation Armenia, the tendency of moving out of the country after graduating from higher educational institutions creates a big problem for Armenia, as a great percentage of educated people leave the country. As stated in the CEU report, the outflow of educated people is not only observed among university graduates, but also academics and other professionals, who make good careers abroad. As stated in the report, the World Bank's official migration data shows that between 2008 and 2012, 75.000 Armenians left the country. The report also shows that 5.7% of the total population of the country with a higher education degree had left the country. However, it is concerning that among other post-Soviet countries, Armenia has the highest number of people who want to migrate from their country. The survey was conducted by GALLUP, and included people aged 15 and older. The survey was conducted in 12 post-Soviet countries. Almost 40% of Armenian participants shared their intentions of migrating from the country. The average percentage of people's desire to migrate from their country for the 12 countries is 15%.

As the 40% mentioned above demonstrates how high is the migration percentage in Armenia compared to other countries of South Caucasus region, it becomes more understandable why a significant number of online and face to face survey participants mentioned one specific reason for choosing higher educational institutions in Armenia. Many respondents said they chose a university based on the opportunities that the university provides students with the eligibility in participating in exchange programs, also continuing their studies abroad with credit

mobility system. The intentions of Armenian students to find career opportunities abroad becomes visible with the online and face to face survey results.

The collected data shows that people should be concerned with Armenians migrating from the country, especially the part of Armenian population with higher academic degrees (Central European University Higher Education Observatory, 2013).

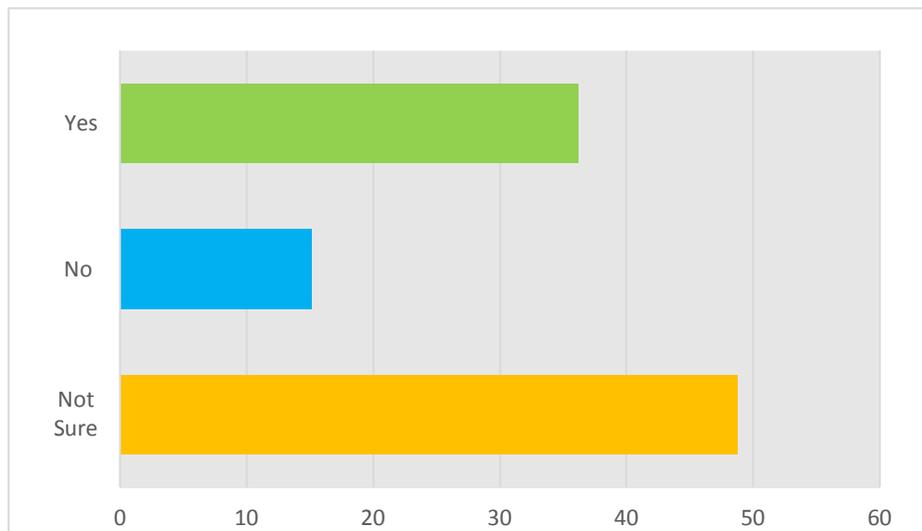
The participants of online and face to face surveys were asked to share their plans concerning whether they intend to move from Armenia or stay and work in Armenia after graduating from higher educational institutions.



(Figure 9: Online Surveys; Leave Armenia)

The results of online surveys demonstrate that 28% of participants said they do plan to leave Armenia to work and live abroad, 25% of participants mentioned their intentions about staying in Armenia and working here. It is interesting to note that almost 50% of students who were asked to share their plans on staying or leaving the country, said they are not sure whether they will stay in Armenia and work here, or leave the country and use their knowledge and skills in a different country.

The results of face to face surveys look somewhat different from the responses of online surveys. It is important to note that the majority of face to face surveys participants were the students of Vanadzor State University and Vanadzor State Engineering University. As demonstrated in Table 9, 15% of face to face survey respondents claimed they do not plan to leave Armenia after graduating from a higher educational institution. Compared to the results of online survey, less people were certain about their decision on staying in Armenia and using their knowledge and skills obtained in higher educational institutions in Armenia. As to people who have already made up their minds about moving from Armenia to work and live abroad, is much higher compared to the results of online survey. 37% of respondents claimed they do intend to

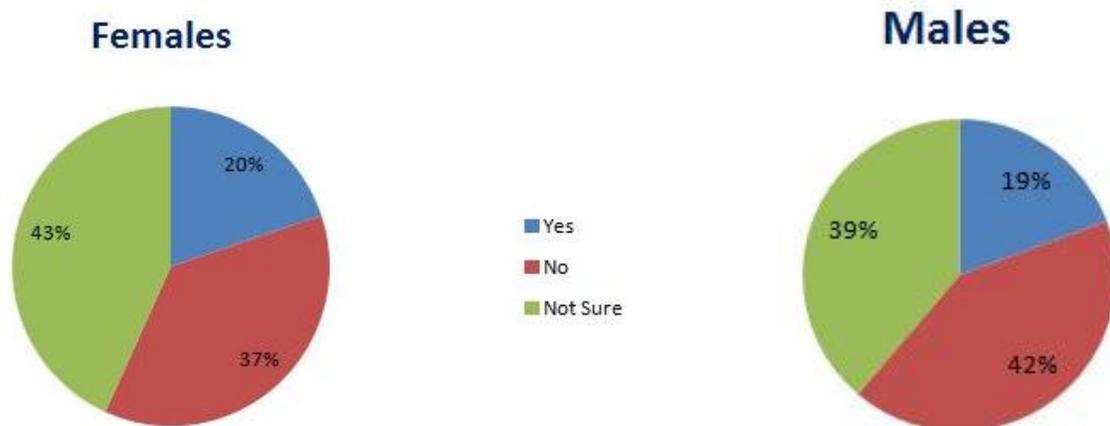


(Figure 10: Face to face surveys; Leave Armenia)

leave Armenia after graduating from universities. Almost 50% of face to face survey participants said they are not certain whether at some point they will move abroad or not. 50% of online survey respondents answered similarly to this question. In both cases, more people are not certain about their intentions of moving from the country, than people who know for sure they

will move abroad after graduating, and people who intend to work and live in Armenia after obtaining their academic degrees. Such high percentages of people not certain whether they will stay to work and live in Armenia or move abroad once again shows that people migrate mostly because of economic insecurity, and if given the opportunities to study and work in Armenia, they would prefer to live in their home country.

It is interesting to note that the responses to the question of whether the respondent intends to leave Armenia after obtaining a higher academic degree, differ among male and female students. Surprisingly, more female respondents said they do have plans of leaving the country, than male respondents. More male respondents claimed they are going to stay and work in Armenia after graduating from a higher educational institution, than female respondents. Moreover, 43% of female participants replied that they are not certain about their future intentions concerning migration. As to male respondents, 39% expressed their uncertainty in planning to leave the country and work and live abroad.



(Figure 11: Face to face surveys; Females vs. males migrating from Armenia)

These results are fascinating as Armenian women are known to be dependent from their families. They are not expected to independently make decisions without having the family's advice, especially when it comes to serious questions such as migrating to a different country. This is a cultural phenomenon and the way female participants of online and face to face surveys responded to the question of leaving the country after obtaining a higher academic degree proves that Armenian young women are changing the old traditions. From surveys, it turned out that especially female respondents studying in American University of Armenia are certain in their decisions for their future and freely express their plans to work and live abroad after graduating from AUA.

Reasons of why people choose certain universities may differ. Some people choose universities for the academic programs offered by the universities, professional faculty, further career opportunities, and popularity of a certain higher educational institution. However, when students spend some time in a university they chose for pursuing higher education, they get to know all the advantages and problems of that university. Among the online and face to face survey questions, there are two questions that ask participants to express their opinion about the advantages their universities have, also some aspects they would like to see improved or changed in their universities. The majority of survey participants shared their concerns about academic programs, curriculum, building accommodations, food and so on. Students of five different Armenian universities made suggestions about possible improvements in their universities. Some students suggested to add more classes specifically aimed towards developing professional skills, especially practical skills that will later be used in work experience. Many students shared the opinion that faculty members should be more objective in terms of grading students. Others suggested to have more international programs, thus providing opportunities for students to study

abroad. A few respondents said they would like to see non-politicized student councils in their universities, and a changed Soviet system grading and curriculum. There were several uncharacteristic answers to the aforementioned question, such as changing the cafeteria, the food, the colors of walls inside the buildings, students, etc.

Besides having concerns about their universities, online and face to face survey participants pointed out the advantages of their universities and why they appreciate their universities. The majority of students said they appreciate the professionalism of the faculty the most. Many participants pointed out the opportunities of exchange programs and credit mobility systems offered by their universities. A significant number of respondents said they appreciate the popularity and the well-known name of their universities. This question is not an exception in terms of respondents' uncharacteristic answers. In this case, many students said they appreciate the cafeteria, food, open-air areas in front of their universities, and so on.

Thus, as a result of online and face to face surveys conducted in five different universities of Armenia, it was found out that the majority of participant students made their own decisions to pursue higher education so that new career opportunities open up in front of them. As it was expected before distributing the surveys and collecting data, the majority of participant students who are currently enrolled in Armenian higher educational institutions do plan to continue with their studies after obtaining a Bachelor's Degree. The results of online and face to face surveys come to prove that Armenians value higher education and tend to continue with pursuing higher education even with little or no support from the Government in terms of scholarships.

The expectations concerning the number of students who would prefer to work and live abroad after obtaining their academic degrees were not met while analyzing the survey results, as almost 50% of participants claimed they are not certain about their intentions on leaving

Armenia and living abroad. Such a high number of people who are not sure about their future plans clearly demonstrates the economic insecurity of the country and proves that if current students were certain about finding job opportunities after they graduate, they would certainly prefer to stay and work in Armenia and use the professional knowledge and skills obtained during their studies in their home country.

This research not only helps to analyze the high enrollment rates in Armenian universities and to find out important reasons of why Armenians value higher education, but it also gives the opportunity to draw conclusions and come up with possible improvements in Higher Education Policy of the country. An essential factor that might need to be overlooked is the scholarship providing system in Armenian higher educational institutions. Many students have to pay whole tuition fees despite their academic achievements. This is something that Armenian universities should consider changing. Even if scholarships covering whole tuition fees are economically impossible, universities can come up with new programs that partly cover tuition fees. If scholarships are provided, instead of worrying about making tuition fee payments, students will feel economically more secure. This would not only encourage more Armenians to pursue higher education, but would also encourage currently enrolled students to study better and realize their goals of finding career opportunities in Armenia.

## **Limitations and Avenues for Future Research**

The public and private higher educational institutions reach a high number in Armenia. In order to have a complete view of students' opinions about their universities, advantages, disadvantages, factors that influenced their decisions on applying to certain higher educational institutions, their intentions on continuing with studies, migrating from the country, 143 students from five different Armenian universities participated in online and face to face surveys.

As the online and face to face surveys were conducted in a month, there was little time to make it possible to include as many Armenian higher educational institutions as possible. Thus, the number of universities was limited to five because of time restrictions and also travel inconveniences, as in order to cover all the higher educational institutions in Armenia, it would be necessary to travel to near and far regions, such as Ararat, Aragacotn, Shirak, Syunik, etc. Travelling to regions would not only take more time, but also financial means, which unfortunately could not be obtained.

Some limitations occurred in analyzing the online and face to face survey responses. There was a relatively low response rate for the two open-ended questions, as many participants simply skipped the open-ended questions, or did not give honest answers. Some limitations occurred with open-ended questions responses because of not being serious and conveying any information. For instance, a number of respondents said they would like to change everything in their universities, and appreciate nothing in their university.

The conducted research opens up possibilities for future research implementations, as the online and face to face surveys were conducted in five different universities of Armenia, whereas the number of higher educational institutions in Armenia reaches almost fifty. If the necessary financial support and enough amount of time were available to continue with the research, it would be possible to collect different perspectives from all higher educational institutions of Armenia, considering results of state and private institutions, thus having a holistic view on higher education in Armenia.

In addition, if provided with enough time and resources, cooperation with higher educational institutions or the Ministry of Education would open new opportunities in taking the project into a new level and shaping university policies, working on academic programs based on responses from students representing various higher educational institutions.

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## Appendix A

### Online and face to face survey questionnaires

1. Your gender.
2. Why did you decide to study in a university?
  - a. to get a diploma
  - b. to become a professional in a certain sphere
  - c. to be busy with something
  - d. other
3. What/who influenced your decision?
  - a. parents
  - b. friends/teachers
  - c. common public opinion
  - d. it was your choice
  - e. other
4. Do you plan to work in the same sphere after graduating?
  - a. yes
  - b. no
  - c. not sure
5. Do you plan on continuing with postgraduate education?
  - a. yes
  - b. no
  - c. not sure

6. Do you have a scholarship from your university?
  - a. yes
  - b. no
  
7. You chose this university for its
  - a. academic program
  - b. professional faculty
  - c. career opportunities
  - d. popularity
  - e. other
  
8. What would you change in your university?
  
9. What aspects do you appreciate the most in your university? Mention your university name.
  
10. Do you plan to leave Armenia, once you obtain your degree?
  - a. yes
  - b. no
  - c. not sure

## **Appendix B**

### **Semi-structured interview with Arina Zohrabian**

#### **Interview Transcript**

1. It has been four years since American University of Armenia launched its first undergraduate program and since then, this year is the first that AUA has freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors. My question is, what was the first year of undergraduate program admissions like, how interested were people in applying to AUA, and what has changed since then?

So, I think one of the major differences between the admissions process back then versus today is that everything was done via paper. So you were in 2013, so you remember the admission process. That's because we did not have a university management system for online applications.

There was certainly interest. Because we made the undergraduate program announcement in 2012, it didn't give students a lot of time and opportunity to prepare for exams. It was our smallest applicant pull out of four years. The number of applicants has increased every single year. But there was definitely interest. In the first year we offered three undergraduate programs, Business, English and Communications and Computer Science, back then it was Computational Sciences. And this year, as we enter our fifth year, we'll be introducing a new program of Engineering Sciences.

In terms of the actual admissions process, I think everything has been still somewhat similar. You know, we are looking at grades, we require the entrance exams, which are Math and Language Proficiency, you know, there is a personal statement, which each

applicant is required to write, and also additional questions, such as extra-curricular, volunteer activities, internship positions and things like that. And in the actual selection process, we have a separate Admissions Committee. Decisions are not made as a lot of people seem to think within the Office of Admissions, but by the separate Admissions Committee, and they are not looking at any one factor. The three factors have always been grades, high school grades, as well as the test scores. Now, as applicants are getting more and more stronger extra-curricular activities and personal statement is becoming more important.

2. Do you notice any particular reasons of why people apply to AUA? Basically, what is the reason that they choose AUA?

The Office of Admissions has never asked that question straight out. Anecdotally, when we conduct Open Houses, one of the main reasons we get is accreditation, we are a U.S accredited university, so I think it is having that accreditation and being licensed in Armenia is a big thing. I think, as importantly, faculty, students know about teachers at AUA, so they come to get a strong education. One new opportunity that we provided after year one, is open classes for applicants. If you have perspective students interested in applying to AUA, we say are you sure this is the university you want, do you imagine what classes look like. The applicants have the opportunity to actually come and engage in class and see is this the learning environment that I want, am I ready for all of this work? Because the students tell us it is a lot of work.

Faculty was number two, and number three is I think, you know, the learning environment at AUA provides students with the opportunity to really learn, the classrooms that have the latest technologies, you have the library, which gives you access

to a lot of books, that you also have access to, I think, 100.000 online materials. So, I think, just the building itself is formed for student success. We have the addition of dormitories. So, I think, slowly but surely AUA is expanding and introducing programs, which result in more applicants. 10% of our students are international, so I think that the diversity in the classroom, although we would like to get that to 20%, I think having that diversity does provide for a better learning environment.

3. About the cooperation with other universities in Armenia, is there any cooperation?

As I represent the Office of Admissions, that is a question that I won't be able to answer. I am actually pretty certain that AUA cooperates with Erasmus Grants, but in what capacity, I definitely could not tell you.

4. About the international students, is the admissions process for international students different?

Same exact application. We don't have a separate application for international applicants. This year, one of the things that we've started is, we're trying to make it more and more transparent, as AUA practices holistic admissions, applicants also need to understand that its becoming more and more competitive. So, a lot of students admitted in 2013, likely would have lower grades than in 2017. If you see the table here, in 2013 we have a target of 79 TOEFL score, and you see here its anywhere between 89 to 91. So it is much higher than these targets. Same thing with AUA Math test or SAT, you see that applicants are generally coming in with pretty strong test scores.

5. When you communicate with prospective international students, do you ask their reasons for choosing AUA, especially when the students Armenian?

Armenia is a very intriguing country and I think students are really excited about coming to AUA, since it is a U.S accredited university at a much lower rate in terms of costs, its much lower than the average tuition they would pay in the U.S.

Again, I don't have research, so I won't be able to answer. In addition to our undergraduate programs, we also have summer programs, so the Diasporan Armenians that are coming really have the desire to study in Armenia. They have some sort of a connection with AUA, whether their parents or some relative is involved, so they know it is high quality education. This is not a complete response because I don't have that information.

6. How do you think higher education is generally regarded in Armenia?

That's a hard question to answer. You're asking for my opinion? There are a number of factors, one, future, right? So, you go to an educational institution pursuing a major that you're interested in, so in the future whether it is starting a new business or getting a job, it will provide you with the skills and knowledge that will be necessary for you to succeed. One of AUA's benefits is that in addition of major requirements, you have the general educational requirements, from presentations to writing, things like that really make an impact.