

**Abstract**

Inconsistent and incoherent approaches to policy reforms have thwarted Armenia's vision of establishing a democratic and competitive higher education system based on "good practices" from Western systems. Attempts at reforms have demonstrated a questionable commitment to meaningful change of the existing system, which is still heavily influenced by Soviet legacy. Armenia's integration into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has turned out to be delusional, resulting in the decline of relevance and therefore quality.

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The Dilemma of "Good Practices" in Armenian Higher Education

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The transfer and diffusion of "good practices" from one context to another in the hope of convergence and mutual recognition of diverse systems globally is a key development in the era of mass higher education. Despite their noble intent, such transfer and diffusion is hindered due to contrasts in contexts, culture, and values.

Borrowing Good Practices

Diffusing good practices borrowed from advanced systems depends on such diverse factors as economic and social needs, change agents, tacit and rigid mechanisms, and values driving the systems where the good practices are planted. Unless contextualized and premised on systemic needs, good intentions are likely to fail along the way.

Former Soviet republics, inspired by advanced models of higher learning, embarked on diffusing good practices premised on Western values and ideologies. Coupled with globalization, internationalization and massification of higher education, these countries faced challenges in finding an adequate balance between a strong Soviet legacy and the new reality, while at the same time trying to restore national identities. Armenian higher education had been experiencing incremental changes to its higher learning model predominantly initiated by lead higher education institutions (HEIs) until 2005, when Armenia officially committed itself to the Bologna Declaration. Following the ratification, the Armenian government took the lead of the reforms, and even though 18 years have passed since then, both systemic and institutional changes are still questioned. At the same time, the Armenian system has become more diversified and differentiated, both horizontally and vertically, with new types of providers. The current higher education landscape is comprised of comprehensive and specialized universities, institutes, academies, conservatories with various legal statuses—state (public), private, intergovernmental, cross-border. Institutional reforms include introducing a new governance model premised on autonomy balanced with accountability, launching internal quality assurance (IQA) systems, and curricular changes.

Changing Governance Structures and Qualifications

A tangible shift away from Soviet practices took place in the 1990s, when it was decided to grant more autonomy to HEIs and to delegate power to boards of trustees, composed of diverse stakeholders. Despite the country's ambitious aspirations to establish a sustainable and autonomous higher education system, balanced with robust accountability, the outcome was limited to actions taken as part of European integration commitments rather than meaningful systemic changes. A clear example is the regulatory framework adopted in 2014–2018 allowing a new legal status for public HEIs—a move from state not-for-profit organizations to foundations. While meant to enhance self-governance and entrepreneurial functions, the experience of 11 state universities demonstrates no tangible accomplishment promoting democratization and competitiveness. In 2019–2022, Armenian authorities introduced a new draft law on higher education and science that further challenged the system's democratization capacity by practically limiting the autonomy of HEIs and giving more power over HEIs back to the government, hence anew drifting away from international “good practices.”

Previously directed by the so-called *state standards* dictated from Moscow, the nature and levels of qualifications offered by HEIs transformed due to the adoption of the Armenian National Qualifications Framework (ANQF) in 2011 premised on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). While EQF promoted academic freedom, failure to understand the logic behind Western systems and their success factors led to coexistence of both Soviet and European qualifications. Despite the adoption of the ANQF, the *state standards*—a legacy from the Soviet times that imposed contents on HEIs' curricula—has not ceased to function. The two-tier system (bachelor, master) introduced through ANQF de facto coexists with Soviet qualifications—five-year specialist diploma plus two layers of postgraduate doctoral degrees (candidate of sciences and doctor of sciences), causing more harm than benefit. As a result, in some subject-specific areas, e.g., medical and health sciences, the newly introduced degree levels tend to be perceived as lacking legitimacy and not recognized by the market, which leads to growing unemployment.

Other “good practices” on top of the reform agenda included moving from teacher- to student-centered education, modernization of curriculum through the introduction of “intended and achieved learning outcomes,” relevant assessment methodologies, improving student engagement and ensuring the visibility of students' voices and choices in the learning process. However, key factors of good practice addressing the change agents' needs were overlooked. For example, the introduction of the *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System*, which hardly managed to serve its primary purposes, failed to be operationalized even at institutional level, let alone across the system and beyond.

The Way Ahead

One of the key systemic transformations and quasi-successes in the Armenian HE is the establishment of an independent external quality assurance (QA) system based on the Bologna action line. During the Soviet era, QA (licensing and inspection) was fully centralized at the Republic of Armenia's ministry of education and was done by designated inspectors who relied on *state standards*. In 2008, tangible transformations took place ensuring independent and objective evaluation of institutional performance by establishing an independent national QA body premised on European “good practices,” and introducing procedural and content changes. The *National Center for Professional Development Quality Assurance* (ANQA), acknowledged at both European and international levels as a dynamically growing QA body, operates in par with European Standards and Guidelines. It was recognized by ENQA and EQAR in 2017 and 2022 respectively. Despite the success with establishing an external QA system, internal QA at HEIs still mainly serves compliance purposes and does not stimulate continuous quality enhancement, thus contributing to a failed quality culture.

Ambitions to democratize Armenian higher education and enhance its competitive capacity through transfer and diffusion of good practices was diverted from the desired trajectory due to insufficient investment into change agents and, most importantly, failure to recognize the crucial role of culture and context in designing reforms. In-depth understanding of factors contributing to effective change within a given culture and

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context, clear vision and values, competitive strategies and priorities, comprehensive analysis of system and society needs, complete government commitment, and change agent empowerment are crucial for successful diffusion of good practices. ▲