



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
Office in Yerevan



## ***Student Democracy in Armenia 2008***

**Country – study visit**

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**Yerevan**

## **Introduction**

The European Students' Union (ESU) was invited by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office in Yerevan in June 2008 to conduct an assessment of the Armenian students' movement. Its mandate was to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Armenia's university student councils in particular, within the general framework of the Armenian higher education sector. In this capacity, the study visit team carried out interviews with the main actors in the higher education sector (rectors, deputy ministers, trade unions) as well as several bodies within the students' movement (student councils, student NGOs and the National Youth Council). The study visit team concluded that through these interviews, it was able to form a relatively clear picture of the Armenian students' movement, even though any such movement is a diverse and complex entity which can hardly be summarised in a few pages of text. The views in this report are based on our interviews, as well as several discussions within the study visit team. This report will make some general considerations and then describes the Armenian students' movement following ESU's four main pillars of student representation. It concludes with a number of recommendations to the main bodies dealing with student representation and particularly addresses the student councils.

## **General considerations**

Although the study visit team found quite some evidence that the Armenian students' movement is not (yet) fulfilling the four pillars of student representation, it is not negative about its future. In several meetings, the team was convinced by enthusiastic individuals that groups of students in every university are ready to take action. This report is written with the aim to provoke the Armenian higher education sector about the way students are represented. The study visit team is optimistic that if a public debate about student representation is started, a strong student movement will develop, highly improving the quality of reforms in higher education.

The most interesting challenge for Armenia's university students is the existence of what the study visit team considers to be a 'two-systems-system'. There is a legal system that ensures student representation in all universities. In that system, student councils exist and have a relatively strong voice in all administrative bodies of public universities. Through the student councils, students can potentially voice their frustrations and change their own realities. Next to this formal structure, an informal decision making procedure exists, in which decisions are taken in a more informal way. Important in this informal decision making procedure are good relations between individuals, informal networks and access to information. These two systems operate next to each other and sometimes overlap, making it hard for students to find a clear way to influence and improve their situation.

The fact that Armenia is just starting to implement the Bologna reforms should be an encouragement for students to claim their participation in all debates on higher education right here, right now.

The study visit team would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the interviews and the OSCE Office in Yerevan to have invited ESU to make such an assessment. We hope to have made a helpful contribution to student participation in Armenia.

## **Student representation**

From 13-17 March 2008, the ESU organised a European Students' Convention under the Slovenian EU-Presidency. The topic of the conference was the development of students' democracy where participants agreed on the so-called 'Ljubljana Declaration', which outlined the main pillars of the student movement. It considers that within the diversity of the student unions around Europe - ranging from "clandestine movements for democracy, acting as triggers for revolution and street protests, to being influential stakeholders advising governments, higher education institutions and other stakeholders within higher education" - there are also uniting factors that form the principles of student representation. The study visit team considers it fundamental to discuss the Armenian students' movement within the framework of these four principles.

## *Openness*

*Openness to all students independent of socio-economical background, race, sexual or political orientation, gender or religious beliefs;*

The study visit team has found no principle grounds of excluding any group from the student representation structures. It has met student representatives of different gender and political orientation. The law on higher education further ensures that the only status that counts for being a student representative is the student status and that party politics are not allowed in the university.

However, in practice, the study visit team found several discriminative aspects within the Armenian student councils. Most visible is that most of the leadership of student councils were associated with, or members of, the ruling political party in Armenia. It was mentioned several times that it was harder to move up in the structures of representation without a party affiliation or with an affiliation of the 'wrong' party. Also, as information flows through informal channels, not everyone has equal access to what is happening inside the decision making structures. Presidents of the university councils were predominantly male, although several female students were presidents of faculty student councils. It was also mentioned in one of the interviews that it was harder for students from poorer families to enter into student representation structures, as they might have to pay high tuition fees and work to compensate for that. Finally, it was often pointed out that the elected student representatives are/should be excellent performers in academic terms.

The study visit team considers that every type of student, excellent or not, should be able to represent other students. The qualities of student leaders do not depend on academic performance or socio-economic background, but on the talent to voice the opinion of students and certain related qualities of leadership.

## ***Democracy***

*A decision making process democratically run and controlled by students;*

The council structure is based on a pyramid-model of representation. Faculty councils are elected by popular vote in which every student has a vote. All faculty councils then jointly elect the university student council. As such, this structure can account for a wide representation of student interests. But it does not at all guarantee that students have much say over the work of the councils! Through an election, students have a say only once a year and in some cases only once in two years. Furthermore there is also a lack of data on the election process and its outcomes (statistical data, exact turn out rates etc.), which makes it hard to judge whether the elections follow democratic standards. The sceptical view of the study visit team towards the university elections is enforced by the fact that the turn-out rates at student council elections are very low. This is why the study visit team sees the collection of statistical data at university elections as one of the major tasks, which needs to be taken up to improve the situation of the Armenian student movement.

In such a structure, the councils must do a great effort to reach students and involve them in their discussions on the conditions of the university and possible strategies to improve them. The study visit team has found very little effort to that aim, except in some rare cases.

Worrying is the fact that very few students participate in the decision making procedures of the student councils. Often, the decision was described as a meeting with the members of the council and agreeing on a position. Councils are hardly accountable to the student body for their positions and claims in meetings with the administration. There are no tools, which enable the students to hold their representatives accountable, mainly because there is a lack of information transfer from the councils to the regular students. Furthermore, there are no institutionalised regular public meetings where students could voice their questions towards their representatives. This leads to a detachment of the representatives from their electorate, especially when elections do not take place every year.

As the university administrations are generally well-informed, resourceful and politically influential, they are able to strongly influence the discourse of discussion with the student representatives. Only in a few cases were the student councils able to challenge and change a decision of the administration, while the many problems of students indicate that this situation should be different. Also, it seemed to the study visit team that in some cases, the leaders of the student bodies were no longer students themselves or had been a student representative for many years, indicating a lack of democratic elections for these positions.

The situation above only affects public universities. In private universities, where national legislation does not apply, the situation is much worse. Only very few of these institutions seem to involve students in their decision making at all. However, the situation of the private universities is so diverse that it is hard to draw general conclusions.

### ***Representativeness***

#### *Representation of all students and of all their interests;*

Student councils exist in all public universities in Armenia, furthermore there are also student NGOs that work closely with the student councils.

However the study visit team thinks that this is the area where the Armenian student representation structures face their biggest challenge. The student councils have often been described as being the ‘elite’ of the student body (in academic or socio-economic terms) that is not much in contact with its electorate. There are few procedures in place to contact the student council, the councils do little to go into the universities with their agendas and the elections are seldom based on issues that are related to the student interests within the university.

This is more worrying as it seems that certain political views are predominant within the student councils, while they are more plural in the student body itself. This has led to a lack of trust in the objectivity and representativeness of the student councils, which was mentioned more than once

during the interviews. Only if all views of students come to the surface and are debated, a decision can be made on what the interests of students are and how they should be represented. Student representatives have gained their visibility mainly due to party politics activism and not through student activism.

The study visit team finds it important to note that it also found other student representation structures. It has seen several NGOs that are closer to students themselves, and organize discussions with students as well as represent their interests. This indicates that no organization holds a monopoly over student representation. Likewise, the study visit team has not found any organization that is representative of all students in Armenia on the national level.

Since there is no national legislation applying to private universities the student involvement at these universities is relatively low.

### ***Independence***

#### *Independence in decision making process against universities, government and party politics.*

Students have, in principle the right to make their own decisions. It is considered normal that these decisions are taken in a political and societal context, in which not everything is possible. The study visit team has found several instances in which the student councils have put forward their own ideas and in some cases made those a reality. It has found positive cases such as fighting corruption, and installing an ombudsperson in several universities in Gyumri. Also, a demonstration against the conscription law that would enforce students to go into the army was mentioned as a successful case.

The study visit team has some doubts about the will of the universities and other actors to let students take independent decisions. It has been mentioned several times that university administrations are closely following any move or glitch in the student body. Also, intrusion of political parties through recruiting young talents and financing activities is an everyday reality, as

there are several votes to be collected in the universities. The team has found that students have few or no resources over which they have decision making power. They rely on the good will of the university administration or other actors to fund their activities and give them a space to work and hold meetings. The resources they allow the student councils to use can easily turn into a blackmail weapon in case of conflicting stands and a correction tool in everyday activity. The perversity of the system relies on the fact that a student leader can be “raised” with such resources, making that person popular in the eyes of the represented students, while never voicing opinions against the administration, even more, being used as a glove for solving the dirty business of the administration. The assumption of the study visit team is based on gloomy cases of punishments applied to members of the academia at the request and pressure of student representatives that were not necessarily proven with facts and data.

The study visit team has further found a schizophrenic relation between universities and party politics. Leaders of the administration and of student councils are generally party members, while politics inside the universities (such as open campaigning, or public discussions on politics) is prohibited by law. The team considers that this raises serious questions of academic freedom for both students and staff. Universities should be an open place for debates, where different political views are expressed and where political events and decisions can be debated openly. A political system that is as highly turbulent as in Armenia might need such an open space even more urgently than other countries.

## **Recommendations**

Within the discussions on the findings, the study visit team has developed several recommendations. These recommendations are divided into four categories – to the student councils, the institutions themselves, the Ministry of Education and Science and the OSCE. The study visit team considers that the organisation of students is primarily a responsibility of students themselves, but a higher education system can ensure circumstances that create a more conducive atmosphere to develop a strong student representation structure.



## *Student Councils*

### 1. Improving information flow to and from students

Student councils should do more to improve their relation with students, which would lead to an increase of trust in their competence and work. It could develop promotion materials, an online tool for communication (although internet access is still a problem for many students), organise public debates and hold surveys or opinion polls to connect better with the student body. Also, the study visit team would recommend that the councils would hold office hours in which students can approach the council for advice and complaints. In order to increase their visibility, the councils could start by addressing first year students with information through university channels and setting up a 'welcome desk' in the university.

### 2. Ensuring more pluralism in debates

The student councils should try to find more critical voices within their own electorate in order to strengthen their views and become more legitimate in their decisions. It should search for opposition to its views and invite these views in public debates as well as internal meetings. The councils should develop a more healthy non-partisan relation with politics and make sure that all political views are expressed in its discussions, not just those of one party.

### 3. Establish independent structures, clear mandates and a work programme

The student councils could become more independent in forming its opinions. They should strive for obtaining legal status. They should be advised that they find resources over which they have their own control (office, bank account, logistics etc.). They should consider to found NGOs through which they have access to project funds and can act as legal entities. The student councils should try to become more rational about their agenda for students. After (or better, before) an election, a work programme should be published with the ideas and actions that the council is planning to undertake. The programme should be debated and agreed with students throughout the university. Furthermore the student councils should start fighting back interferences from university administrations and political parties.

## *Universities*

### 1. Give students autonomy over resources

The student body should have control over a budget line that is dedicated to student affairs and can be used for purposes of student representation. Students should have properly equipped offices and meeting spaces in which they can meet freely without the presence or affirmation of university administration (i.e. students should have their own set of keys to these premises).

### 2. Improve information flow about elections and student councils

The university administration has a strong monopoly on information about education reforms and affairs in the university. The administration should produce information leaflets, a newspaper magazine aimed at students and publish its plans for university reforms on its website in a digestible and easy understandable format. During elections for councils, the university administration should widely promote this issue and provide its information resources to everyone running for office.

### 3. Improve own level of proficiency

Universities should strive for a stronger autonomy from the state. Even though having members of the Ministry of Education and the Government on the university board can have advantages it also is a threat to university autonomy and could constrain the universities in their actions. Universities should also debate educational policies with students and teaching staff to improve acceptance of changes and to mutually transfer knowledge and information. Students should also be included in university quality assurance bodies, because students are the only group involved that does not have an agenda differing from the general quality assurance agenda. The only interest of students in this process is getting the best education possible. Finally they are the only ones who can integrate the perspective of the person taught by the educational system to complete the perspective of the teachers.

## *The Ministry of Education and Science*

### 1. Improve information about reforms

The Ministry of Education and Science should publish an information leaflet, and hold information sessions about the Bologna reforms that are aimed at the student population. It could use its network of Bologna experts to organise this work.

### 2. Revise legislation to make student bodies more independent

The Ministry should make it legally possible and simple for students to found their own NGOs with a bank account and independent resources (financial, meeting space, etc). This should also become possible for student councils, so they can develop their independence from the university administration.

### 3. Consider the status of private universities

As it has become apparent that the government is considering to revise legislation regarding private universities, student representation structures should be addressed in to-be-developed procedures. In particular, it should become obligatory that students participate in quality assurance mechanisms.

### 4. Include students in national debates and bodies

The Ministry of Education and Science should include students in the national quality assurance body. As mentioned above, students are the only group involved that does not have an agenda differing from the general quality assurance agenda. They can add an important perspective to the quality assurance process and can link better to students in the respective universities to get authentic views on the teaching process from them.

Furthermore the Ministry should include students and teaching staff in debates on higher education prior to adopting legal measures. By doing so the Ministry can produce better laws which will be widely accepted and regulate higher education in a way that the output will be improved.

## *OSCE*

### 1. Conduct an anti-corruption campaign

ESU advises the OSCE to conduct an anti-corruption campaign or a “campaign for a clean university” following the examples of Romania or Serbia. It should include all stakeholders, meaning students, university administration, and relevant ministries. There should be an elected board carrying out the campaign for this board individuals should apply and student union involvement should matter but should not be mandatory.

### 2. Monitor the university elections

The OSCE has a very good reputation concerning election monitoring so it would be a good option to monitor the elections on the university level. The OSCE should collect and publish the election laws of the universities and provide a budget for every candidate running to produce campaigning material. As a last step the OSCE should monitor the elections and publish the results.

### 3. Publish a best-practice guide

The students in Armenia should be provided with some examples of best-practice work both from within and outside Armenia. This can help to start a general open discussion on higher education in Armenia. The guide should contain best-practice examples from European countries as benchmarks and Armenian examples as a sign that change is possible. The publication should be printed, available online and there should be a series of events where the publication is presented and debated with students around Armenia.

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## **The European Students' Union (ESU)**

The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 49 national unions of students from 38 countries and through these members represents over 10 million students. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Council of Europe and UNESCO.

Rue de la Sablonnière 20

1000 Brussels

Belgium

Tel: +32-2-502 23 62

Fax: +32-2-706 48 26

E-mail: [secretariat@esu-online.org](mailto:secretariat@esu-online.org)

Website: [www.esu-online.org](http://www.esu-online.org)