

Market-Oriented Education as a factor of Country Competitiveness

prepared remarks – Tom Samuelian

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Education is a way of preparing young people for life. One of the key aspects of a person's life is his or her career. In a market economy, individuals need to be prepared to find their way to a fulfilling job that will use their talents, give them a sense of self-worth, and provide them with an income sufficient to meet their and their family's daily needs. It is an individual's duty to himself or herself to constantly improve his or her knowledge and skills and thereby be in demand, find a rewarding job, and command a good salary. This is not easy. It requires the right attitude, good interpersonal skills, the ability to work in teams, the ability to understand one's employer's goals and needs, and the initiative to fulfill them without being told. This is necessary because Armenian companies are competing in the global market against the companies of other countries and in those companies employees are constantly working to improve themselves, to improve their company's products, and to assure that customers are satisfied.

A company is like an athletic team, each player must be well-trained and in good shape, and each player must work with the others to do his/her job well and assure that the team wins. Unlike a sport, however, the rules of the game keep changing as the market demands new products, companies become more efficient, and new companies enter the market. If a country's companies compete well in the world economy, the country becomes wealthier and the standard of living rises. A highly competent work force is a national asset that permits that country to compete effectively.

The global market is dynamic. Workers in the new economy are expected to constantly improve their knowledge and skills, on their own. That means that they must have certain basic information and practical applied skills that will enable them to find new information and learn on their own. Upon graduation, the student is not a finished product with set skills, but a worker who knows how to develop. In a lifetime, many people will change their jobs and fields 5-6 times.

Specialization, therefore, is less important than flexibility, general problem-solving skills, research skills, interpersonal skills, a sense of responsibility, persistence, and many aspects of character, such as reliability, honesty and trust. To be effective in the market, people need to understand careers, how to find jobs, how to deal with predictable events in the course of one's life, including finding a job, moving to a new job, losing a job, changing careers, balancing family, work and community responsibilities. From each individual, the market demands different things.

Given that so many classical operations are now handled by computers, it is less important for people to gain "pencil and paper" skills in those fields, and more important for them to know how to use software and how to conceptualize the problem and the method of solving it using software. Similarly, most facts are readily available on the internet. The new skill is finding the facts and knowing how to weigh the facts and more importantly the way the facts are presented and analyzed. Rote-learning is not nearly as useful as the ability to find facts and apply logic to them.

The most important skill is the ability to think, explain and write clearly and the ability to extract knowledge and ideas from what one reads. This is learned best through practice and by reading good writing. More attention needs to be paid to good non-fiction prose writing, letter writing and report writing, since this is the kind of writing that is most in demand in the work place. Also, quality of understanding is more important than quantity of literature read. Too often students read hundreds of pages of literature, memorize the biographies of writers and various historical facts. They can name characters and retell the plots, but do not understand the message of the book or the writer's art. Students need to be exposed to more international literature, more world history and more economics. Finally, students need to have a sense of identity and national purpose. This means they need to know Armenian history and culture in context. Without the ability to move back and forth between the universal the particular and the ability to contextualize information, workers will not be able to compete in the global market.

The school is a microcosm of life and the workplace. Socialization — the relations between student and teacher, teacher and principal, principal and parent, student and student — all affect the ability of the student to become a good worker. If students are treated fairly, given tasks that require them to solve problems, if they are encouraged to think on their own and to take initiative and responsibility for their own development, then they will become workers with those skills. If on the other hand their grades and success in the education system are based on connections or money, then they will take these to be the norm and continue to live by them in the work place. We must practice what we preach. Students learn by example. We cannot tell them that merit matters and then grade them based on their parents' ability or willingness to pay. A fair, efficient economy starts with fair, efficient education.