

Notes from a Meeting with the U.S. Agency for International Development
and the Rectors and Advisers of Three Armenian Universities
New York City, 26 October 2004

Summary

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has been supporting the installation of computer laboratories and short training courses in Armenian universities. The goal is to improve the education program, especially in science and technology. In addition USAID has installed the .LRN learning and collaboration environment from the .LRN Consortium based on original development at MIT's Sloan School of Management.

The purpose of this afternoon briefing at New York University was to consider the alternative of using Sakai software for collaboration and course delivery and open content. The Rectors (President and CEO) and their advisors—the “Working Group”—are now considering this alternative. If more information is needed, USAID is considering sponsoring them to the December SEPP Conference in New Orleans and possibly a one-week training program at one of the core universities.

Attending

Radik M. Martirosyan, Rector, Yerevan State University
Samvel Shoukourian, Faculty of Computer Science, Yerevan State University
Yuri Sargsyan, Rector, State Engineering University of Armenia
Rubin V. Aghgashyan, Vice-Rector, General Education & International Relations, State Engineering University of Armenia
Grigor Kirakosyan, Record, Yerevan State Institute of Economy
Vardan Sargsyan, Vice Head of the Department, Department of IT & Systems, Yerevan State Institute of Economy
Kim Jefferson, IT Analyst, SETA Corporation representing the United States Agency for International Development, Information Technology Transfer
Michael Lewis, U.S. Agency for International Development and New York University
Norman White, Information, Operations, and Management Sciences, Leonard N. Stern School of Business, New York University

Background

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is assisting countries to development their education infrastructure and educational programs. One of the projects has been assistance to Armenia. This has included purchase of computing equipment for the laboratories of the universities, short courses in e-commerce, networking and security, and installation of MIT's .LRN learning management system and related course material. .LRN has not yet been used for instruction.

“LRN core capabilities include: course management, online community support, learning management, and content management.”¹

The .LRN learning management and collaboration environment includes File Storage that in the future will support WebDAV, Forums, Calendar, News, E-Mail, Homework Dropbox, Survey, Weblogs, News Aggregator, Chat Support with IRC and Jabber add-ons, Bookmarks, Authentication, and Translation Interface for other languages.² Developed at MIT, it is supported by the .LRN Consortium. “Charter members of the .LRN Consortium include MIT Sloan School of Management, the University of Heidelberg, the European Union-backed E-LANE project, and the University of Sydney.”³

Users include Birzeit University, Palestine, University of Delhi, India, University of Sydney, Australia, American University in Bulgaria, Fachhochschule Heilbronn, Germany, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, Københavns Universitets, Denmark, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Spain, Universität Heidelberg, Germany, Universität Mannheim, Germany, Universitat de Valencia, Spain, Universitetet i Bergen, Norway, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien, Austria, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Sloan School of Management, USA, St. Mary's College of Maryland, USA, University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute, USA, Faculdade Latino-americana de Ciências Sociais, Brazil, ITESM (Tecnológico de Monterrey), Mexico, Universidad Agraria de la Habana, Cuba, Universidad del Cauca, Colombia, Universidad Galileo, Guatemala, and Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería, Nicaragua.⁴

This meeting was to review the status of the Sakai Project to consider the Sakai software as a possible alternative for the universities.

Context

Yerevan State University is the principal and largest Armenian university. Yerevan State Institute of Economy was the principal source of government officials that managed the Armenian economy. The State Engineering University of Armenia is the primary science and engineering university and, with two others—Moscow and Minsk—developed the technology to support the Soviet Union’s defense, much as MIT did through Lincoln Laboratories and Mitre Corporation.

During the informal lunch, Rector Yuri Sargsyan provided the following background. Under the Soviet Union the University had 26,000 students. Following the separation of the Union, the enrollment declined to 5,000 and now has risen to 11,000. About half of the students are foreign students, primarily from Iran and Syria. The annual tuition, which provides 80% of the University’s budget, is equivalent to US\$300 per academic year for

¹ From dotlrn.mit.edu/, 27 October 2004.

² From dotlrn.mit.edu/features/, 27 October 2004.

³ From dotlrn.mit.edu/news/cat/press, 27 October 2004.

⁴ From dotlrn.mit.edu/partners/, 27 October 2004.

Armenian students and US\$1200 for foreign students. This computes to be a total budget of US\$10.3 million. The average salary of an assistant professor is US\$80 per month, an associate US\$140, and a full professor US\$180. The Rector receives US\$300 per month plus US\$250 per month from the National Academy of Sciences. Mr. Sargsyan was elected Rector by the faculty 18 years ago. He served in Parliament for 12 or the 18 years. How is this possible? “Well they get their apartment free. And no one can have a private car, a vacation, a summer home, or travel.” Most try to get a second job, but the unemployment is more than 20%. Michael Lewis mentioned that the hotel concierge is completing her PhD in computer science and finds the hotel position to be the most lucrative. Mr. Sargsyan said that after the economic transition, the city had electric power only 2 to 3 hours per day for about 3 years. “It was very difficult just to survive.” He said most of the young faculty left Armenia either for Russia or the U.S.

By law, Armenian students may only take classes that are taught in Armenian; classes for foreign students are in English.

Mr. Sargsyan attended Stanford University for one year and returned as a lecturer for another year.

This background explains the limited flexibility the University administration has to purchase equipment or services from the European Union or the United States. One of the universities has a copy of WebCT—at a price of US\$500 for the first year—that they must discontinue because the price has sharply increased. This is a change in pricing policy for software that is repeated throughout these projects.

The meeting was sponsored by U.S. Agency for International Development. In order to travel to the U.S., the six had to be interviewed by the American Embassy and fingerprinted for the Department of Homeland Security. Upon arrival, the fingerprints of one did not match and the six were held for a number of hours until this could be resolved.⁵

The Opportunity

Based on communications from USAID, I was invited to join the group for lunch and to have a two and half hour discussion of the Sakai project and the partners’ program. The Rectors, scheduled for 30 minutes, stayed more than an hour. NYU professor Norman White had used the Sakai Collaborative Learning Environment 1.0 and joined the discussion.

⁵ A report by the National Institute of Science and Technology reported that a certain percentage of fingerprints would not match depending upon the technique used in recording and the manufacturer of the equipment. According to the trade press, when the fingerprints upon arrival fails to match those taken by the U.S. Consulate, the two images are sent to especially trained fingerprint experts in San Diego who make the final determination. The Department of Homeland Security said their contract would provide for this special match to be made within 6 minutes, 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. Apparently 6 hours is a better estimate. This process was not a “warm welcome” to the U.S.

USAID was interested in seeing if Sakai may be a better and better supported alternative learning and collaboration environment. During the briefing, I explained the number of different software developments, how they were being integrated, and the emerging role of the Partners. I demonstrated Sakai 1.0 as it is being used for the Sakai Project. Mr. White advocated Sakai primarily because he thought it would become a rich environment and would have the strongest support by the both the Sakai community and the commercial firms. (NYU is a Sakai partner, currently uses Blackboard, and David Ackerman has represented Sakai in meetings with publishers).

The questions were primarily based on how the software would be supported, the general component and service architecture, and appropriate pedagogy. More than half of the discussion focused on internationalization, the role of the XLIFF standard for translation (I demonstrated uPortal's XLIFF viewer) and use of open content, especially the science courses being developed by Foothill De Anza (for structure) and the possible adaptation of Open CourseWare. According to Mr. Lewis, the new Armenian curriculum is now structured in courses. The Armenian universities have changed to the 4 year BS + 2 Master from the 5 year masters program, primarily to be consistent with the European Union. (Armenia will be signing the Bologna Accord later this fall. The Bologna Process moves to transferable course credit rather than requiring all work be done at a single university).

USAID had recommended the principals attend the SEPP Conference. I suggested that hearing the presentations, seeing the demonstrations, and meeting the people who are involved in both development and implementation (especially content and repository) would provide a better evaluation of whether Sakai would serve their needs or not. Then subsequently they could consider joining the Partners' Program. Because of the economic distortions, the universities would need SEPP pricing based on the ability-to-pay.

I said they could attend the conference without charge, but that a USAID representative would need to join them to assist them with travel, conference arrangements, and translation if needed. We also discussed the possibility of a one-week Sakai training program to be held at one of the core universities for Armenia and other countries participating in USAID-sponsored education technology projects.

The results of the Working Group's review of the Sakai materials and presentation should be available next week.