

Appliance of Science in Armenia

Author: [Haykuhi Barseghyan](#)

Academic focus used to be on pure research, but now the country needs ideas that can feed into manufacturing.

For such a small country, Armenia has turned out more than its fair share of physicists, mathematicians and other scientists in fields from astronomy to medicine over the years.

These days, the talk is of practical applications to give local industries a competitive edge. But Armenia is struggling to translate scientific brilliance into commercially-viable production lines.

Vardan Sahakyan, head of science policy at the State Committee for Science, says the country has some good physicists and biologists, but needs to attract private investors if their ideas are to find practical application.

The government has been running a scheme under which it part-funds project ideas in conjunction with the private sector.

“The economy ministry does not exist to commercialise scientific products, so we cannot do that,” said Gohar Grigoryan, head of innovation at the ministry, which is running the funding scheme. “We have submitted projects to the ministry’s investment programme to be presented to international companies and businessmen. That is something we can help with.”

One of three projects selected in the 2011 round was led by Amur Margaryan of Armenia’s Institute of Physics, who invented a highly sensitive photon detector which has a potential medical application for the early diagnosis of cancer, as well as in other areas.

In 2011, the State Committee for Science proposed setting up a centre for the commercialisation of science, but this has yet to come into being.

Vardan Gevorgyan, whose company PSI makes high-tech sensors, says more needs to be done to facilitate the move from research to manufacturing, including better protections for intellectual property.

“Countries achieve economic hyper-development only thanks to companies founded on innovative technology. That isn’t happening in Armenia, because scientific institutions and scientists are forced to do everything themselves,” he told IWPR. “Scientists can’t create products and bring them to market all by themselves. The scientist should do the science while a [commercial] system makes the result attractive and takes it to market.”

PSI, which stands for Precision Sensors and Instruments, was founded in 2008 and makes sensors for medical, military and seismological use, selling mainly to Singapore and the United States,.

Gevorgyan said bureaucracy was a major obstacle to growing a high-tech business like PSI.

“If we want to take a product to an exhibition, it takes us a month to get the documentation. We need permission from three official agencies to allow us to ship the product,” he said. “We waste colossal sums just to take our product to an exhibition for a week and then bring it back.”

Karen Karapetyan, a board member of Armenia’s Technology Transfer Association, said the country was a disadvantage since the domestic market was not big enough on its own for science-based production to be commercially viable. Exporting was difficult since potential customers were unfamiliar with Armenian-made items.

“However famous a scientist is in our country, no one will even know who he is in America or New Zealand. They don’t even know Armenia is a player in the game,” Karapetyan told IWPR.

Alexander Khachunts, head of the National Science and Transitional Technologies Fund, a non-governmental organisation, argues that the Soviet-era focus on pure scientific research lives on and is now an obstacle to progress, because scientists are often uninterested in translating discoveries into money-making production.

“More than 20 years have passed since independence, but nothing has changed in the universities. Nothing has been organised for the students, young people, or lecturers to understand how to make science commercial,” he said.

Back in 2005 and 2006, Khachunts’s organisation tried to run a programme bringing scientific products to

market, but had to stop because there was no money to fund it.

Haykuhi Barseghyan is a journalist with the Armenian news site www.ankakh.com

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