

2004-06 Commencement

Melkonian Graduation Address given by the Chairperson of Melkonian Educational Institution Board, Mr. SARKIS BUCHAKJIAN.

"Our goal is to transform Melkonian as the Eton of the Armenian Diaspora. On this memorable day of commencement, on behalf of the whole Melkonian Community, I publicly appeal to the AGBU Central Board to reconsider their decision of closure. Thank you for your attention and patience. SARKIS BUCHAKJIAN Chairperson of Melkonian Educational Institution Board (Graduation speech - June 12th, 2004) "

2003-06 MEI Chairman Report

SARKIS BUCHAKJIAN
Chairman of MEI School Board

Subject : Information about MEI
Date : November 3, 2003

The following document and the attachments aim to highlight the main issues and concerns about MEI. Please find below the outline of this document:

- A. Circulating Views about MEI's Future**
- B. Facts about MEI**
- C. Special Advantages for MEI's Location in Cyprus**
- D. How is MEI's Mission Still Relevant?**
- E. Who Would Send their Children to MEI?**
- F. The Financial Viability of MEI and Future Prospects**
- G. The Mission or Raison d'Etire of MEI**
- H. Conclusion**

A. Circulating Views about MEI's Future

1. Some views suggest the relocation of MEI to Armenia, Lebanon or Bulgaria. These people are unaware of the unique advantages of MEI being in Cyprus.
 - a) Armenia (Developing country): It is grappling with economic and political problems that require a few decades to be resolved. Although visits of youth groups to Armenia will always be attractive, it is unlikely that Diasporan communities will send their children to a boarding school in Armenia. Besides, a thriving and strong Diaspora is very important for the future development of Armenia. It is the Diaspora that needs a school like MEI.
 - b) Lebanon (Developing country): It has been, and will be, in a politically hot area. It is true that the Armenian community is large and dynamic but local circumstances are limiting. Local politics and insecurity, added to the general instability in the Middle East, does not create confidence for people to send their children to a boarding school there. AGBU already has schools that satisfy the needs of the Lebanese Armenians.
 - c) Bulgaria (Developing country): It has a long way to go before being considered as a suitable location as compared to Cyprus. A local school may be very suitable for the people of Plovdiv, where most Armenians live. But how can it attract students from all the other Armenian communities in the wide region?

- d) Cyprus (Developed country): Though they are a small community, the Armenians of Cyprus are Armenian speaking and have preserved the traditions and values of our culture. Moreover, the island itself is European, attractive, safe and has congenial climate.
- ◆ MEI lavishly enjoys the support and generosity of the Cypriot government: Maximum individual subsidies to Cypriot-Armenian students; special grants to the school and more to come.
 - ◆ MEI has the unique freedom and encouragement of the Cypriot government to offer in-depth instruction in Armenian and to preserve all the symbols of the Armenian identity, such as language, literature, history, art, traditions, values and customs. This advantage is not found anywhere else in the world.
- e) MEI is primarily serving the Diasporan communities where more Armenians live than in Armenia, a total of 4,934,611. MEI is at the heart of more than 3.5 million Armenians living in the region outside Armenia. (The survey published in August 1999 by the Republic of Armenia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows the following figures for Armenians living outside Armenia: Russia/CIS = 2,446,000; N. America = 1,050,000; W. Europe = 547,006; Middle East = 490,240; S. America = 172,650; E. Europe = 182,500; Oceania = 45,600; F. East = 355; Africa = 260)
2. Others propose its relocation in Cyprus in an isolated remote place on cheaper land, without considering its ramification on students' social life and their integration with the local community. Nor the fact that the Melkonian Brothers are also buried on the school site. The location of all prestigious educational institutions is on prime property, yet their relocation is never an issue, no matter how highly valued the price of their present property is. (Would American University of Beirut or Cambridge University or Harvard University sell their sites and build more modern complexes in cheaper areas?)
3. The third view is closing down MEI, selling its property and redistributing those funds to various AGBU projects. It would be a great mistake to decide to close down a thriving and successful educational institution that has and still can have unique contribution to Armenians. Moreover, such an eventuality will jeopardise the future of more than 200 students who have no opportunities of being mainstreamed in schools in their countries due to the major differences between the British curriculum at MEI and their local ones.

B. Facts about MEI

After eight years of continuous efforts of the MEI Board and the Principal, MEI has accomplished unprecedented and unique successes as an Armenian school, making it one of the best according to modern standards. Despite all the hurdles, there has been continuous growth in enrollment, improved income, better conditions of buildings and facilities, renewed image and enhanced relations with the public and private sectors in Cyprus and Armenian communities in the region.

1. Academic:

- ◆ Success of a school is not measured by its financial status but by its academic achievements. (*Attachment 1 a, b, c*)

- ◆ Higher and consistent academic standards (unprecedented in MEI's history) have been attained. The minimum standard for receiving the Melkonian Diploma is higher than most Armenian schools: These standards comply with the requirements of UK and American universities. The academic by-laws of the school sets high standards, and those students who do not fulfill the conditions do not receive the Melkonian Diploma. In fact, parents are recommended to find another school for their children if they cannot cope with the academic requirements of the school.
- ◆ In June 2003 we had phenomenal results with our graduating class of 27 students. 48% of them received grades A-C in at least 2 GCE "A"-Level exams (each "A" Level is equivalent to 2APs). Five students had exceptional results in up to 5 A-Levels, meriting them admission to the most competitive universities in the UK or USA. These results are particularly significant when we take into consideration the varied backgrounds of our students and the wide range of their abilities. *It should also be noted that all the 2003 graduates are continuing their education; but, unfortunately, although the five exceptional students were clear candidates for Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, Stanford or MIT, they have enrolled in more modest universities due to financial difficulties.*
- ◆ The excellent academic standards attained have enabled Tamar Jourian to earn a Fulbright scholarship and British Council Gold Medal, and Vruyr Kaprielian to win the first ever prize from Cambridge University for highest achievement in IGCSE exams in Cyprus. Based on a survey of our graduates for the last eight years, more than 90% of our graduates have gone to western universities worldwide (not community colleges), which is hardly matched by any other Armenian school, including the AGBU schools.
(Attachment 2 a, b, c, d)
- ◆ Apart from having established international academic standards, the comprehensive Armenian programme consolidates the Armenian identity of our students who learn Armenian language, literature, history and art. Components of the Armenian culture are nurtured through the different extracurricular activities too, such as the folkdance, choir, band, theatre, and journalism. *(Attachment 3)*
- ◆ For the purpose of educating the whole child, MEI has adopted a Pastoral Care programme that is based on social education and life skills. These sessions help our adolescents cope with everyday difficulties in a multi-cultural setting, preparing them for global challenges as well as sensitising them to the needs of the Armenian communities worldwide.
- ◆ The quality of the teachers, supervisors and administrative staff has improved within the prevailing conditions and means. The school has managed to keep a relatively low turnover of teachers in all subjects, although the Armenian Department has encountered some difficulties due to the small pool of qualified people.
- ◆ MEI is offering comparable academic standards to exclusive schools in the UK and international schools in Europe. MEI's curriculum is based on the European model that offers depth and breadth.
- ◆ Enrollment in comparable private schools in Europe is generally around 400 students aged 3 to 18+, while MEI's enrollment for ages only 11+ to 18+ has reached to 251. *(Attachment 4)*
- ◆ While the Teacher-student ratio in comparable schools in Europe and Cyprus ranges from 5.6 to 10 students per teacher, MEI has Teacher-student ratio of 8.2:1, which is a very healthy figure, specially for a private boarding school. *(also Attachment 4)*

- ◆ The academic standards attained at MEI allow Lebanese students to get equivalence to Lebanese Bacc II and, therefore, may follow any specialisation at universities in Lebanon.
- ◆ Also students from Greece are continuing their education at very good universities.
- ◆ Students from other countries receive instruction in their native languages and in most instances complete GCE Advanced level examinations (e.g. Arabic, Russian, French). Greek A-Level is a must for Cypriot and Greek students, while additional Greek is also offered to students from Greece to help them prepare for the national entrance exams.
- ◆ In 2003 MEI became a Cambridge University Centre, which is a very prestigious affiliation for MEI. (*Attachment 5 a, b*)

2. Facilities:

- ◆ The school facilities have been improved and upgraded to offer better conditions and more advanced technology that enhance academic excellence. (*Attachment 6*)
- ◆ The Buildings and grounds have undergone essential, overdue renovations to ensure acceptable physical environment.
- ◆ The school Library has a collection of more than 25,000 books that are being indexed and catalogued by a professional Librarian based on the Dewey system.
- ◆ The school operation has become fully computerised.

3. Financial:

- ◆ MEI tuition fees have doubled in the last 8 years, enhancing income. This was achieved despite government restrictions on tuition raises.
- ◆ The school accounts are regularly audited by an external auditing firm. A healthier financial growth is ensured. Just note that in the last 8 years:
- ◆ Income from tuitions (paid by parents and sponsors) has almost tripled (260%) from 1996 to 2003. This was due to the continuous increase in fees and the persistent policy of the administration to make parents contribute more for their children's education. (Parent contribution alone has doubled)
- ◆ General Income collected by the school from parents, sponsors and activities has increased 250% from 1996 to 2003.
- ◆ Total Expenditure (including Capital Expenditure) has increased at a lower rate since 1996. The rate of increase is 194% in 2003 and expected to be 187% in 2004. The inevitable increase in General Expenditure can be attributed mainly to the improved quality of teachers and their mandatory yearly raises, on one hand, and the improvements of the school facilities and equipment, on the other hand. In other words, this increase has been in favour of the general development and upgrade of MEI.

4. Relations:

- ◆ The school has emerged from its shell and has integrated with the local community. MEI is now on the 'map' and locals are being educated about the new reinvented MEI through public events and media coverage. (*Attachment 7 a, b*)
- ◆ Close ties with the Cypriot Government and with the support of the Armenian Representative in the Parliament, Mr. Bedros Kalaydjian, government subsidies to Cypriot-Armenians have been on the increase. For example, from 360 CP in 1996 to 1200 CP in 2003, as yearly payment for Cypriot-Armenians. (1 CP = 2 US \$)

- ◆ This year we are executing the special government grant of 70,000 CP (around \$140,000) to fully renovate, equip and upgrade our Computer lab, and to establish fully equipped Language lab and a Design & Technology lab. This project alone further enhances our academic standard and our image. (*Attachment 8 a, b, c*)
- ◆ Our special recruitment efforts have fundamentally enhanced the number of applicants, allowing us year-after-year to be more selective with new candidates. (*Attachment 9*)
- ◆ Due to our persistent strategies and recruitment tours, our enrollment and quality of our students improved. The graduation criteria are evidence to the quality of students at MEI. Please note our yearly enrollment trends. (*Attachment 10 a, b, c*)
- ◆ To improve the process of integration with the local community, to enhance the school's global image and income sources, MEI has the approval of the Central Board to accept up to 20% non-Armenian students.

C. Special Advantages for MEI's Location in Cyprus

1. The Armenian community in Cyprus is constitutionally recognised as a Minority and there are special rights and privileges that Armenians in Cyprus already benefit from, with more advantageous prospects to come starting May 2004, when Cyprus will officially enter the European Union. Please note that although France has a community of 400,000 Armenians, they are not constitutionally recognised as a Minority and therefore cannot enjoy benefits like the Cypriot Armenians. (*Attachment 11*)
2. The government pays 1200 CP per each Cypriot-Armenian only when they attend MEI for their secondary education. This is done to comply with its obligation to offer secondary education in the minority language.
3. MEI not only enjoys the privilege of offering an in-depth Armenian programme, as part of the general curriculum, but rather it is encouraged to maintain all symbols of the Armenian culture – language, literature, history, art and traditions). Moreover, because the Armenian language is recognised as a non-territorial language, “Cyprus is obliged to provide public funding on account of its recent ratification of the European charter for regional languages.” Armenians are the only Minority in Cyprus to have their language, and, therefore, the government of Cyprus assumes the responsibility to fund projects that perpetuate the Armenian language.
4. Accession to Europe will benefit MEI because, though it is a private school, the government considers it as serving its Armenian minority and therefore public funding will continue to pour and increase in the years to come. On one hand, the Cypriot government will not be obliged to build and finance a secondary school for Armenians, while on the other hand, MEI will benefit from these funds to balance its budget. The first grant of 70,000 CP (\$140,000) is being executed, without any conditions of commitment from AGBU. There are two other grants that are in the pipeline and are being pursued by Mr Bedros Kalaydjian, the Representative of the Armenian Community in the Parliament:
 - a) a substantial yearly grant so that MEI continues its mission of perpetuating the Armenian language, culture and heritage in favour of its Armenian community.
 - b) the upgrade of the sports facilities estimated at about 50,000 CP (\$100,000).

5. It is true that the Armenian community in Cyprus is not very large, about 3000 people, yet with the privileges granted to it children of all Armenians coming from different communities are benefiting.
6. Special funds from European programmes such as Erasmus, Socrates, Oracle,... not only will open new opportunities for research for the Armenian Department, but also facilitate the exchange of students and MEI's integration with the larger European community.
7. It would be a great pity to disregard all these advantages that only Cyprus can offer.

D. How is MEI's Mission Still Relevant?

1. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the loss of interest in political ideologies and the emergence of globalisation, there's more tendency for the youth to search for their identities and go back to their roots – ethnic or religious.
2. The Armenian youth, dispersed worldwide, will return to their roots and Armenian identity as the binding sociological element for their existence.
3. Is there a better place for educating our youth and reinforcing their Armenian identity other than our schools? The preservation and perpetuation of a culture can be sustained for generations to come not through Sunday schools, summer camps or through one or two visits to Armenia, but through regular everyday schools that recreate a wholesome experience. With this, the out of school activities and youth projects are not underestimated, because the inculcation of the Armenian identity is a continuously developmental process that requires the joint contribution of the family, school, youth clubs and the church.
4. Without our schools, our Western Armenian language and culture is particularly endangered of extinction. MEI can play a unique role as the bastion for Western Armenian education.
5. It is the smaller communities in the world, such as the Armenians, that specially fear the dangers of extinction and therefore struggle to preserve their existence through education. For example, the Agha Khan having gained insight from human history, is spending millions to open schools for the Ismailite minority so that their culture is not absorbed and perished by the larger Muslim masses. The AGBU has immense potential to lead the Diaspora and one of its strong and successful educational institutions is the MEI.
6. Our generations will completely dissolve in larger cultures if our Armenian linguistic and cultural heritage is not preserved. The Armenian school's mission is irreplaceable!

E. Who Would Send Their Children to MEI?

1. For a substantial number of Armenians in Cyprus, MEI is the best option for secondary education.

2. The boarding facilities of the MEI and its academic reputation suit the needs of different people:
 - ◆ Families who worry about modern day dangers in society such as drug abuse, random shootings, violence, sexual perversion, would seriously consider sending their children to a co-educational boarding school that offers a safe and caring environment like MEI.
 - ◆ The number of Armenians living outside Armenia has increased in recent years. Many of them, such as in Russia, are subjected to ethnic discrimination. MEI can offer safe haven and good education in a tolerant environment where pupils share a common identity.
 - ◆ Mobile families who travel a lot and would like a stable education for their children.
 - ◆ The European dimension is particularly attractive, since graduates not only fulfill requirements of European universities, but also American ones.
 - ◆ Many Armenians were deprived of Armenian education due to regime restrictions in their countries and in the absence of secondary schools in their countries, MEI is a possible destination. We have some students who have one Armenian parent or even Armenian grandparents who have come to MEI to rediscover their roots.
 - ◆ Children of single, divorced or socially disadvantaged parents would have opportunities of a better education and future in an external environment such as MEI that can offer a safer emotional base for these children.
3. Advantages of sending children to Melkonian boarding school:
 - ◆ To benefit from the successful model of MEI where high academic standards based on international norms and Armenian education are combined.
 - ◆ The Armenian adolescents will be exposed to the multicultural Armenian reality, where youth from Armenia and Diaspora merge and forge important bonds.
 - ◆ Boarding is a melting pot with boarders coming together from different cultural, social and economic backgrounds. Pupils learn how to be tolerant, broad-minded and resourceful.
 - ◆ It is an excellent transition from home to university and between youth and independence.
 - ◆ Boarders learn the skills necessary for self-reliance.
 - ◆ Boarding environment forges strong friendships that may even lead to marriages.

F. The Financial Viability of MEI and Future Prospects

The MEI board has plans that can ensure total financial viability. These plans, if approved by the AGBU Central Board, can cover all the expenses of the school and sustain its development.

If the Central Board approves MEI Board's plans, MEI can

- ◆ apply for international accreditation to enhance its academic standard and image;
- ◆ improve its facilities in the school and boarding by adding more comfort;
- ◆ raise its tuition fees and consequently increase income from parent payments;
- ◆ attract higher quality teachers;
- ◆ attract more quality students through aggressive marketing and recruitment strategy;
- ◆ offer limited scholarships to very deserving, needy Armenian students, thus adding to the corps of high quality students.

G. The Mission or Raison d'Étre of MEI

1. After the Armenian Genocide and the deportation of Armenians to the Middle East through the deserts of Syria, large number of children were orphaned, homeless, and without education. The primary purpose of the Melkonian Brothers to build a school was to gather some of these children under a roof and educate them. Their motive was altruistic: to reach out to the needy.
2. The successive calamities of the Armenian people, at the dawn of the 20th century, induced the Melkonian Brothers to consolidate their belief in the education of future generations. The geographical location of Cyprus and its proximity to other Armenian communities was vital in deciding to build the school in Cyprus and not in an Arab country.
3. They firmly believed that education was going to be the strongest weapon with which the future generations would defend themselves against any injustices. The survival of the youth was going to be determined by their skills to adapt to the continuously changing challenges in the world. They had the vision of capitalising on our human resources.

Diasporan Armenian reality changed over the decades and this evolution is reflected in the history of MEI. It started as an orphanage school in 1926 and evolved into a technical and vocational school. Having lost our intelligentsia by the 1920s, MEI played an important role in filling that gap and prepared people for the roles that society needed then: teachers, writers, poets, editors, public servants. But with the passing of time, with more integration and improvement of economic and social conditions of our communities in the region, Armenian communities are more in need of professionals who can survive the competitiveness created by globalisation. This is the challenge of MEI in the new millenium: to prepare Armenian youth for the international community, while at the same time involve them with our ethnic challenges. The Melkonian Brothers would have liked to see the coming generations ready to tackle the struggles of the international arena, while at the same time pursuing the ideals of the Armenian people.

The mission of MEI is infinite. Due to its dynamism, MEI has been able to reinvent itself over the decades to meet with the needs of our societies. Its cost-effectiveness now is measured through the academic standards required of all its students.

H. Conclusion

After the closure of Murat Raphaelian boarding school in Venice, MEI remains to be the only hope for a large number of Armenians throughout the world who either don't have the choice of sending their children to an Armenian school or prefer an Armenian boarding school. Luckily, MEI is not in a comparable situation as the former, which was closed due to mismanagement. MEI has a vital role to play in the preparation of our human resources, the only secure investment that will yield results by serving worldwide communities.

MEI is undoubtedly an important heritage symbol to all Armenians. It is more than a school. It is an educational institution with a strong tradition, rich past, successful present and a promising future.

Today, MEI has dual mission:

1. To offer academic excellence to Armenian children from around the world and prepare them for prestigious universities.
2. To immerse them in the Armenian culture and sensitise them to the challenges facing the Armenian people.

AGBU leadership can benefit from all the prospects created by Cyprus joining Europe, and through its guidance and the ingenious management of the MEI Board and the Principal, MEI can become the Armenian 'Eton'.

MEI is a feather in AGBU's hat and can become the jewel on its crown.

Give MEI the chance it deserves. Give the Armenian children the chance to have a VIP passport through their education at MEI.

(Attachment 12: Appreciation letters from dignitaries and the AGBU on the occasion of MEI's 75th anniversary)

Thank you for your attention and patience.