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## 10. Corruption in the education sector

*Stephen P. Heyneman*

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### BACKGROUND

Corruption in the education sector differs from corruption in health care, police, courts, industry, banking and agriculture in two respects. For the most part, the education sector involves children and young adults. When for private gain, children and young adults bypass the rules and official norms, the experience has ramifications for them as adults and for the wider community to which they belong. Secondly, educational institutions are consciously constructed as places where the official norms are supposed to apply. The official norms in education, as in health (do no harm), are universal. They include fairness to all, entrance to elite forms of training on the basis of achievement, and adherence to good behavior in classrooms, cafeterias, playgrounds, hallways, toilets, in transportation to and from home and on school outings (Heyneman, 2000). Schools are designed to be a microcosm of the good society. While banking and agriculture have norms and expectations, in the education sector these norms and expectations are key to the educational architecture. Hence, the implications of the education sector's corruption can be more serious.

The definition of education corruption derives from the more general set of corruption issues. Like other areas, it includes the abuse of authority for material gain (Anechiarico and Jacobs, 1996; Kalnins, 2001; Frimpong and Jacques, 1999). But because education is an important public good, its professional standards include more than just material goods; hence the definition of education corruption also includes the abuse of authority for professional prestige as well as material gain.

### WHY IS EDUCATION CORRUPTION IMPORTANT?

Since the time of Plato, it has generally been understood that a key ingredient in the making of a nation/state is how it chooses its technical, commercial and political leaders. In general it is agreed that no modern nation can be legitimate if leaders are selected on the basis of ascriptive characteristics, the characteristics with which they are born – race, gender, social status. On the other hand it is usual for families to try to protect and otherwise advantage their own children and relatives. Every parent wishes success for his own child; every group wishes to see success of children from their particular group. This is normal.

Schooling provides the mechanism through which these opposing influences can be managed fairly. It is the common instrument employed by nations to 'refresh' their leadership. Economists have tried to estimate the sacrifice to economic growth if there is substantial bias in the selection of its leaders (Klitgaard, 1986). Some suggest that developing countries could improve their gross domestic product/capita by 5 percent if they were to base the selection of leaders upon merit as opposed to gender or social status (Piñera and Selowsky, 1981). By some estimates, choosing leaders on the basis of merit would benefit developing countries three

times more than would reducing Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) trade restrictions on imports (Kirmani et al. 1984).

Success in schooling is one of the few background characteristics seen as necessary for modern leadership. Although it is possible for leaders to emerge through experience, privilege or good fortune, nevertheless, getting ahead in schooling is itself commonly treated as essential.

But what if schooling itself is not fair? What if the public comes to believe that the provision of schooling favors one social group? What if the public does not trust the judgment of teachers on student performance? What would happen if the process of schooling had been corrupted?

The fact is that, in a democracy, the public takes a very active interest in the fairness of its education system (Heyneman, 2010a; 2011; 2013). If the public does not trust the education system to be fair, more than economic growth may be sacrificed. It might be said that current leaders, whether in commerce, science or politics, had acquired their positions through privilege rather than achievement (Anechiaro and Jacobs, 1996; Frimpong and Jacques, 1999). If the school system cannot be trusted, it may detract from a nation's sense of social cohesion, a principal ingredient of sustainable societies (Heyneman, 2000).

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EDUCATION SYSTEM FREE OF CORRUPTION

Free of corruption, a school system is characterized by an equality of educational opportunity, fairness in the distribution of curricula (such as access to preparation for tertiary education) and materials, fairness and transparency in the criteria for tertiary education selection, fairness in the accreditation in which institutions are given license to operate, balance and generosity in the treatment of less powerful citizens and geographical neighbors, maintenance of professional conduct by those who administer educational institutions and who teach in them, whether public or private.

Some elements of education corruption are identical to the corruption found in other sectors. Procurement may be decided on the basis of secret bribes paid to administrators, similar to construction projects in highways, ports, industry or hospitals. Taxation on property or income may be changed because of private arrangements with public officials parallel to what may occur in the commercial sector.<sup>1</sup> Salaries may be paid to non-existent employees, with managers pocketing the checks (Reinikka and Svensson, 2004; Hubbard, 2008), similar to what may occur in other sectors such as the military where salary recurrent expenditures are a major budget item. Public-sector budget allocations may be distorted by favoring sectors which offer more opportunity for bribes and kickbacks. This advantages sectors heavy on capital infrastructure (Jajkowiec and Drobniszova, 2015; Mauro, 1998; Delavallade, 2006). Permission to operate may be granted to universities on the basis of secret payments to accreditation authorities just as licensing may be granted to commercial enterprises on the basis of secret payments to public officials (Heyneman, 2010a; 2011; 2013). In these instances, education sector corruption is not significantly different from corruption in other sectors. Hence its governing authority are courts of law and normal legal structures.

But a large part of education sector corruption is particular to the sector and is not governed by legislation and courts. These elements concern the corruption of professional ethics (Braxton and Bayer, 1999, p. 137) and may include: accepting of material gifts in exchange

for positive grades, assessments or selection to specialized programs, assigning grades on the basis of a student's race, social class or other ascriptive characteristics, insisting on a student's adopting of an instructor's values or philosophy,<sup>2</sup> disclosing student confidential information, sexually or otherwise exploiting, harassing or discriminating against particular students,<sup>3</sup> adopting text or other educational materials on the basis of bribes from manufacturers, forcing students to purchase materials copyrighted by the instructor<sup>4</sup> and utilizing school property for personal profit.<sup>5</sup>

Definitions of faculty misconduct may differ from one country to another. In some it is common for teachers to accept payment for allowing students to proceed to the next grade. This is particularly common in Latin America (Heyneman, 2004). In some countries it is common for teachers to offer after-school tutoring for a price, and to suggest that students might fail if they do not pay for after-school tutoring (Dawson, 2009). In some countries, faculty may operate a 'private' school in after-school hours, hence using public property for private gain. In some instances, a school administrator or university rector may rent school property, or use it for manufacturing or agriculture commerce and not report the income (Heyneman, 2000).

Where misconduct constitutes a criminal offence it can be judged through the criminal court system. But professional misconduct must be judged by the profession itself, as in law or medicine. A teacher bias against a certain category of student, payments for a grade and plagiarism in research publications are examples where adjudication has to be done through strong professional boards with the authority to fine and dismiss. In essence, the range of corruption in the education sector is quite diverse. It may be helpful for us to concentrate on one specific aspect: the act of a higher education student bribing a department head for admission to a program or a teacher to obtain a specific grade.

## BRIBERY: ONE ASPECT OF EDUCATION CORRUPTION

In one way or another education-sector corruption is universal, but some forms are common in some parts of the world and unknown in others (Heyneman, 2010a; 2014b). Though gate keepers to scarce goods may generate the temptation to use the allocation function for private gain, education bribery is common in the former Soviet Union, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, but not in OECD countries (Transparency International, 2005; 2013; Heyneman, 2004). For example, in a survey of university students, 76 percent in Moldova said they would cheat on an examination if they would not get caught, and 80 percent in Bulgaria admitted that they would not feel bad if they cheated. Thirty-six percent of the university students surveyed in Serbia believed that faculty would change a grade for a price and 45 percent believed that students could pay to gain admission to their university. Sixty-four percent of the surveyed students at the National State University in Kyrgyzstan thought that their university was 'bribe-able'. When displayed by subject of study, the fields with the highest probability of accepting bribes were in law, economics and management (Heyneman, 2007a).

### **Education Bribery and General Corruption in the Public Sector**

It is suggested that bribery thrives where salaries are inadequate (Chene, 2009; New Republic, 2015; de Graaf, 2007; Gov.UK, 2015). And to be sure, the association between low salaries and bribery is reasonable to assume. But although low salaries may increase the pressure

on individuals to bypass professional standards, it does not negate the need for professional standards. It is also the case that bribery is higher in those fields in which salaries are higher to begin with (Heyneman, 2004; Heyneman et al., 2008) and where labor market prospects for graduates are higher (Teixeira and Roacha, 2006; Hrabak et al, 2004; Kerkvliet, 1994; Nowell and Laufer, 1997).

It is also suggested that bribery thrives where professional institutions and sanctions are weak, where regulations are not transparent and where there is a culture of permission (Heath et al., 2016). In countries where these elements accurately describe the public sector generally, corruption in the education sector follows (Patino, 2002; Transparency International, 2013). When a great effort was made in Georgia to root out corruption in the police, investments were made in new police stations made of glass walls. This was to illustrate that the public was welcome to see what was going on inside. Simultaneously, an effort was made to shift university admission mechanisms away from face-to-face oral exams to a standardized examination with practice questions widely distributed in rural areas. Results were parallel: the public began to perceive the police differently and children of the poor and from rural areas began to enter universities in large numbers (Heyneman, 2009).

### **How Are Education Bribes Paid? What Actually Happens?**

Professors may let students know the ‘price’ for a particular grade and prices for entry to particular graduate programs are circulated anonymously, occasionally on social media. Payments can be made by leaving cash-filled envelopes on faculty desks; the admission’s office may have a particular person with the informal assignment of collecting envelopes. Librarians collect bribes to keep required readings available for students who pass envelopes to them. Student housing is allocated by departments and because many universities are situated in high-priced cities having access to student housing is a tradable commodity. Although courses may be completed, signatures are required for the granting of course credits and for degrees. Signatures are withheld until an envelope appears (Heyneman, 2004).

In 2006 support was received to privately interview faculty members in Kazakhstan, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. Among the questions asked concerned whether they had participated in an act of bribery and, if so, how did it make them feel? Although some were clearly nervous about the question, only three (out of 111) respondents refused to allow a tape recording of their answers.

One senior professor at Tbilisi State University in Georgia laid out what he considered the recent history of bribery at his university:

Admissions were a way to make money, huge money. But once inside the university, corruption depended upon the department. It was worse in law and business and economics. No one in his right mind would study math or physics if he is corrupt. If you go into math or physics there is no work, no jobs, so we get only highly motivated students. (Heyneman, 2007b, p. 313)<sup>6</sup>

One professor from East Kazakhstan University recalled his experience:

When I was a student I did not know what corruption was. But then I got to Almaty [the capital] and I found out. When I wrote my thesis I faced many difficulties. It took me seven years to defend my thesis. I had to go back again and again and again to get the signature of the committee chair. I did not pay but I know that it would have been expedited if I had paid a bribe. (Heyneman, 2007b, p. 313)

The worst occasions of ‘moral terrorism’ occur when a faculty colleague or senior administrators request that a grade is changed for a particular student. From Tbilisi State University, for instance, one faculty member related the following: ‘The worst are my colleagues who put pressure on me... and the worst are colleagues who were our former teachers... even the dean puts pressure... It makes me feel pretty bad... the most corrupt are the most influential. It is very difficult’ (Heyneman, 2007b, p. 313). And an example from a young female faculty member at East Kazakhstan State:

Once the dean called me about a grade for a daughter of the vice rector. The vice rector had been removed from his position and was in the hospital. The dean said that the vice rector had already suffered and let’s not make him suffer any more, so give his daughter a good grade. After I gave her a good grade, I suffered.

Many faculty members described participating in an act of bribery as making them ‘feel terrible’. Several ended up in tears and the interview had to be postponed. One woman said that bribery made her ‘feel violated’. But then others had rationalizations. One faculty member said that when she changed a grade she knew ‘someone had benefited’. ‘I did something good for someone else even though I suffered.’ Another said:

For a while I had a firm position about changing grades. But I was making a lot of enemies. Now I try to meet the requests half way. I still make the student study, but I will give him a good grade. I will give a student an easy assignment to complete and then give him/her a good grade. I get phone calls and direct requests. On the inside I know I am not doing the right thing. (Heyneman, 2007b, p. 314)

Reforms such as standardized examinations have helped to reduce the level of corruption in admissions. One faculty member at Tbilisi State said that: ‘Because of standardized exams... many things have changed. Students from rural areas and poor homes are more numerous. When bribery was necessary to enter the university, these students had no chance to enter.’ The problem is not that bribery can be overcome with new innovations, but that it can re-emerge once techniques to bypass new safeguards are found. One pointed out that: ‘After two years, each college student takes an internal exam designed by the ministry of education. For the first several years it operated fairly. But now it too has become corrupted. Cell phones and cheat sheets are allowed into the test for a price’ (Heyneman, 2007b, p. 314).

### **Adverse Effects of Higher Education Bribery**

That education corruption has adverse consequences has never been in doubt but some have pointed out that not all consequences are adverse. Sociologists have noted that cultural and traditional customs such as honoring one’s teacher with a gift of appreciation may be misinterpreted (Patico, 2002). These have had to be redefined so that a line can be drawn between what constitutes corruption and what constitutes normal social behavior (Heyneman, 2010b). Others have suggested that payments to teachers and health workers may help them advance in social status (Morris and Polese, 2016). Some have argued that corruption can be efficiency-improving in those instances where prices (tuition, fees or wages) are distorted by regulation or lags in application, though this point of view has been challenged when consumers have to reapply continuously for permits and licenses (Ahlin and Bose, 2007). Efficiency goals fail if a university acquires a reputation for having faculty or administrators who accept

bribes for entry, grades or graduation. The power of a university with this reputation will suffer from labor market challenges. This is particularly the case with private enterprises which draw on international labor markets. Some too have argued that the perception of corruption is not the same as actual corruption and that the differences may be significant (Charron, 2016).

In doing research on higher education corruption in Central Asia we were able to estimate the effect on private and social economic returns to education investment.<sup>7</sup> If students purchase grades they have less incentive to learn the material. Advancement is less associated with knowledge and the acquisition of skill than wealth and the ability to pay for ‘achievement’. The private and social returns to education are degraded. The signaling function of a degree is also reduced. Completion of education cannot be closely linked to the ability of a student if entry into programs and high grades are for sale. The employer does not know whether the student completed the program and did well because h/she was a high-ability, low-cost student or because h/she acquired grades illegally or unfairly. Even if an individual student is free of corruption but has attended an institution with corruption reduced, the value of the degree is reduced. An employer with a choice of candidates reduces the risk of hiring an unproductive employee by avoiding graduates of corrupt institutions and programs and only hiring students from institutions or departments with a reputation for honesty. For this employer to hire a student from a corrupt program, the student would have to accept a significantly lower salary and prove his/her economic value to the employer through on-the-job experience over time.

Corruption at the undergraduate level affects the probability that a student may obtain a graduate degree. Graduate programs, particularly in universities situated in OECD countries, discount applicants from institutions in which corruption is perceived as common. Applicants from corrupt programs are less likely to be selected because grades and test scores do not represent their ability to do graduate work.

Corruption adversely affects the relative ability of higher education to keep people out of poverty over their working lifetime. This effect is evident in all regions but is most pronounced in the Europe and Central Asia region. Corruption in higher education changes the ability of education to maintain employment and increase income. The cost to a student who attends a university characterized by a high level of corruption is equivalent to sacrificing the economic impact of higher education quality.

## RESPONSES TO HIGHER EDUCATION CORRUPTION

Honesty in higher education depends on the strength of professional character within individuals and institutions. Even in the most adverse environments, where bribery and competition for personal advantage is the norm, there are numerous resisters who refuse to participate (Heyneman, 2009). However, resisters acting as individuals are not sufficient. Fortunately there are three categories of pressure on higher education institutions which may help lower the risk of a corruption culture becoming endemic (Heyneman, 2017).

The first is the shift away from having universities provide professional licenses to practice in the professions. Because bribery tends to be greater in the highly rewarded professions of medicine, law and economics (Kerkvliet, 1994; Hrabak et al., 2004; Heyneman, 2017) and because the existence of for-profit universities is close to universal, continuing to have all universities provide the license to practice exposes the public to unqualified pilots, architects and doctors. Having a professional institution, such as a bar or medical association, award the

license to practice lowers the risk to the public. In turn, this lowers the demand to bribe university faculty by students who need a license to practice a profession (Heyneman and Lee, 2013).

The second is the influence of international organizations and international norms in the comparing of degrees and programs of training. Among the most well known is the Bologna Process in which universities in the 28 countries of Eastern and Central Europe aspire to be recognized as the equivalent of university programs in Western Europe. If not carefully monitored the criteria for equivalence, for instance between a program at East Kazakhstan State University and the London School of Economics, could lead to a decline in the latter's value. This tends to place new demands on the Bologna Process by reason of the high stakes involved. And it offers the opportunity to insert the necessary criteria of 'equivalence' to incentivize applicant institutions (Maricik, 2009; Bergan, 2009; Sahlberg, 2009; Heyneman and Skinner, 2014).

The third influence is that of international competition for excellence. Universities are under a great deal of pressure to bring themselves up to international standards. Much has been written about the various systems of ranking the quality of universities, but one side effect of international ranking has been relatively unnoticed and that is how broad the demand is to change behavior within local institutions. One characteristic of world-class universities is that,<sup>8</sup> in whatever country they are situated, all address the issue of corruption directly in their advertisements. Perhaps most importantly, the University of Tokyo, Harvard and the London School of Economics all showcase what they do to combat corruption. World-class universities assume that corruption exists, including at their institutions, and all specify in detail the countermeasures they are actively taking. Universities in countries where corruption is highest tend to ignore the problem. They do not mention anything about it in their advertisements on the grounds that there is no evidence that they have a corruption problem. World-class universities take the position that they could be guilty of the problem and that is why they are combatting it (Heyneman, 2014a).

There are many influences on universities which may counteract the tendency to accept the normalcy of bribes and unprofessional standards, but the following may be the most powerful: the professionalization of the licensing process, the pressure to be compared to universities in other parts of the world and competition for world-class status.

## NOTES

1. The distinction between non-profit and for-profit educational institutions is not clear in many parts of the world. What in some cases would be treated as legitimate cost recovery might in other cases be categorized as taxable income (Heyneman et al., 2008; Heyneman and Skinner, 2014).
2. This latter issue tends to be true of education systems in OECD countries.
3. Sexual harassment in classrooms may be more common in Sub-Saharan Africa than other regions (Bakari and Leach, 2009; Collins, 2009).
4. Common in the Europe and Central Asia region: faculty will not allow students to sit for a final exam without showing proof of purchase of the faculty member's publication.
5. Examples: using a public classroom to operate a private for-profit school or selling student products for personal profit.
6. Mathematics and sciences were popular subjects of study in the Soviet Union. When labor markets were administered by the state, there was no unemployment. However, once labor markets were freed and industry was privatized, the economic returns to studying traditional subjects collapsed (Heyneman, 2000).

7. Adapted from Heyneman et al., 2008.
8. 'World class' is defined as those universities which appear on the list distributed by the *Times Education Supplement* of the best in the world (Heyneman, 2014a).

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