

# Taxonomy of Corruption in Higher Education

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This article explores the phenomenon of corruption that has become common in higher education in developing countries around the world. Cases of educational corruption include, among others, paying bribes for grades, buying diplomas, and admissions to universities. An available body of literature on educational corruption does not provide sufficient insight on the nature and structure of the phenomenon. This article attempts to fill in the gaps by developing the taxonomy of corruption in higher education. This taxonomy distinguishes educational-specific corruption from that common to any public sector by identifying corruption that directly and indirectly involves students. Moreover, this article distinguishes different types of educational-specific corruption depending on the area of occurrence and the agents involved. This classification disaggregates the complex phenomenon of corruption in higher education and develops common understanding of its structure and possible agreement on definitions. Different types of corruption may require different theoretical and methodological approaches if research is to be conducted on educational corruption. Deconstruction of corruption in higher education serves as a tool for further research.

Corruption has become a widespread phenomenon in higher education institutions in countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States

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(CIS). Both formal (World Bank, 2002, 2003) and informal reports posit that bribes are increasingly necessary to gain admissions into university programs, as well as to obtain high marks for academic achievements. Diplomas and dissertations are available for purchase, and academic mentors charge their students for consultations. Corruption in higher education is not limited to the CIS region. According to the evidence presented by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Chronicle, 2002), corruption in academe is a worldwide phenomenon. Developing countries appear to stand out on this measure; however, the developed countries are not immune to it either.

Flourishing of educational corruption has a negative impact on society. It undermines public trust in higher education, exacerbates the quality of education, prepares unqualified young professionals, and teaches them distorted values and culture. The media, student testimony, and a limited body of research on educational corruption (World Bank, 2002, 2003) suggest that corruption in education may be a far-reaching occurrence. Despite the serious consequences that educational corruption forces on society and its possible pervasiveness around the world, this observable fact only recently started to gain the attention of educational researchers. Although significant progress is observed in the field, insight into the structures and processes of educational corruption is still limited.

Similar to other contributions, the goal of this article is to increase the awareness of the educational research community about the existence of educational corruption and its far-reaching consequences for higher education and society. In addition, this article attempts to gain new insights into the aforementioned problem by developing a new taxonomy of educational corruption. If a general understanding of the structure of corruption in the educational sector, as well as agreement on their definition and identification, can be reached, then the issue can be addressed more effectively in the future.

### Definition of Corruption

How does one define corruption? Contemporary literature gives multiple definitions of corruption, all of which take into account one or another particular aspect, but none can account for its complexity. As a result, some definitions are limited and only applicable in a narrow range of cases. The opposite also occurs when the definitions become too broad and, as a result, useless (Waite & Allen, 2003). Additional research and scholarly discussion is essential to develop a better understanding of corruption. In the short term, however, use of multiple definitions illuminating different as-

pects of the phenomenon appears to be an acceptable solution for the analysis of the educational corruption.

The most commonly used definition of corruption is the “abuse of authority for material gain” (Anechiarico & Jacobs, 1996). A similar definition of modern corruption is described as a violation of the legally established barriers that exist between public office and private interests or as an abuse of authority for private gain (Nye, 1967). The obvious virtue of this definition is that it provides a starting point for analysis of corruption by explicitly mentioning the separation of public and private interests. An alternative definition of corruption is the exchange of wealth for power, where the power is rooted in a public position (Jain, 2001). This definition may be expanded by adding the possibility of exchanging power for power as a form of corruption. This article draws on both definitions of corruption and applies them to education-related corruption.

Corruption in the public sector is a widespread occurrence around the world. The media often reports cases of corruption in various countries and social subsystems including police stations, customs, political systems, courts, and businesses. Corruption has also become a subject of multiple research studies. Substantial efforts have been made by scholars of corruption who tried to understand the costs of corruption in customs (Larmour & Wolanin, 2001); police stations (Bouza, 2001); political systems (Kotkin & Sajo, 2002); and, more specifically, effects of corruption in one public sector (e.g., political) on other public sectors (e.g., health and education; Gupta, Davoodi, & Tiongson, 2000) and adverse consequences of corruption on economic development (Theobald, 1990). Some interesting studies try to identify the antecedents of political corruption (Fjeldstad, 2003).

The educational system is not immune to corruption, and limited evidence suggests that corruption may be a widespread incident in this sector. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and Transparency International regularly reports facts and testimonies on educational corruption in different countries. For a review of cases of educational corruption around the world, see Rummyantseva (2002).

Corruption in higher education deserves attention for many reasons but in particular because of the negative impact it has on society. For example, analysis of newspaper articles and television news programs about countries in the CIS region implies that corruption in higher education undermines employers’ and the general public’s trust in the country’s colleges and universities. Many employers in Russia and the Ukraine explicitly state in job advertisements that only graduates from certain universities are welcome to apply. The locals explain that this is because they do not trust other institutions due to corruption. When it applies to professional

certification, corruption in education can be detrimental to public health and safety by allowing incompetent doctors, teachers, and other professionals who have purchased their grades or licenses to practice. Furthermore, it undermines the sources from which countries select future leaders when it interferes in the selection process in higher education. It diminishes the effectiveness and quality of higher education and inhibits access for the poor. As reported in the study conducted by the World Bank (2003), the correlation between perceptions of quality and corruption in education in Kazakhstan is  $-0.27$ , and the correlation between access and corruption is  $-0.25$ .

Corruption distorts civic culture by scarring the reputation of fairness normally associated with an educational establishment and breeding a culture of cynicism about the nation and its claimed civic virtues. When higher education is corrupt, young people come to believe that cheating and bribing is an acceptable way to advance their careers. Corruption undermines incentives that motivate young people to work hard while teaching them that there are easier ways to achieve success. In essence, educational institutions characterized by corruption weaken, rather than strengthen, a nation's social cohesion (Heyneman, *in press*). Despite its negative impact and pervasiveness, corruption in education has remained a neglected research topic; scholars of higher education only recently began exploring this issue.

### Corruption in Higher Education

Corruption in higher education may take multiple forms and permeate all areas of the system. Heyneman (*in press*) provided an overview of the categories of corruption in higher education and distinguished between corruption in selection, corruption in accreditation, corruption in procurement, professional misconduct, and corruption in educational property and taxes. Chapman (*in press*) provided a broad classification of corruption in secondary and higher education, which breaks down various illicit activities into groups by the level of occurrence and type of activities. To summarize, Chapman's classification suggested that corruption occurs in the following levels of the educational system: Ministry of Education, region–district, school level, classroom–teacher level, and international agencies. It manifests itself through the following activities: favoritism in procurement, favoritism in personnel appointments, ghost teachers, selling admissions and grades, private tutoring, and skimming from project grants (to name a few). Waite and Allen (2003) dedicated an article to corruption in educational administration where they provide several exam-

ples of such corruption. In his overview of corruption in academe, Altbach (2004) distinguished between professorial corruption and corruption in examinations. The first category includes favoritism in hiring and promotion, whereas the second category includes paying bribes for examination grades. Janashia (2004) described corruption in higher education in the Republic of Georgia that occurs in admissions, regular examinations, and in the process of private tutoring. According to some anecdotal evidence, "the price for university admission may range anywhere from \$200 to \$10,000, depending on the prestige of a university department and a student's qualifications" (Janashia, 2004, p. XX). Bray (2003) raised the issue of supplementary private tutoring as a possible subset of corrupt activities. He brought the fact that supplementary private tutoring is a widespread issue in East Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe.

Every article on educational corruption reviewed here formulates recommendations on how to reduce the level of corruption in education. In this article, I argue that any suggestion may be premature and misleading if it is made before the complexity of the structure of educational corruption is thoroughly understood. Developing a deep and solid understanding of the structure of educational corruption is necessary for building strong theories on its potential causes and regulatory mechanisms. I intend to expand on the existing understanding of educational corruption by developing a new taxonomy to better describe this phenomenon and to qualitatively distinguish between different types of corrupt activities. In other words, this taxonomy acknowledges the complexity of educational corruption by qualitatively deconstructing corruption, rather than recognizing it as simply one large phenomenon. This method seeks to identify categories of corruption that are unique to education, as well as isolate those that are common to education and other public sectors. The usefulness of such a classification is based on the idea that understanding a particular type of corruption provides more insight regarding its causes and consequences. Therefore, by distinguishing between conceptually different types of educational corruption, this taxonomy serves as a starting point for future studies on its antecedents, consequences, and policy recommendations on anticorruption measures. In addition, a new classification may become a starting point for the development of vocabulary on educational corruption that will facilitate future discussion and research in this area.

### Taxonomy of Corruption in Higher Education

What is unique to educational corruption? Does it deserve special attention, or can it be viewed as a subset of corrupt practices common to

any public sectors? Perhaps the best way to answer these questions is to analyze the consequences of corruption in higher education on society by comparing them to outcomes of corruption in other public sectors. Chapman (in press) distinguished two different types of consequences of educational corruption. First, educational corruption leads to waste of the financial resources. This is similar to corruption's consequences in other public sectors. Second, costs of educational corruption are incurred when children are denied access to schooling because of corruption in admission; when misallocation of talent occurs as a result of bribery in examinations and tracking processes; and when propagation of culture of corruption, manipulation, and favoritism among the new generation of citizens occur as they personally participate in corruption. These types of consequences are not common to just any public sector. On the contrary, these consequences are interwoven with essential functions of the higher educational system; therefore, the corruption that produces them is education specific.

Education is the public sector that possesses the greatest ability to influence the destiny and success of society's youth. It is perhaps the only public sector that has the greatest influence on the young's values and beliefs about good and evil, right and wrong, legal and illicit. Moreover, higher education has a strong influence on the selection of the elite and, thus, the nation's future leadership. The importance of these functions of higher education for the well-being of society is tremendous. When corruption interferes with the core tasks of higher education, it tends to undermine the welfare of society by ultimately affecting its youths.

Does educational corruption always interfere with the core functions of the educational system? Does any type of corruption directly affect a student's opportunities in life or change his or her values and beliefs? An affirmative response will perhaps be an unreasonable exaggeration. Some types of corruption, primarily those occurring in administrative or ministerial levels (Chapman, in press), may prove harmful for system's financial well-being or accreditation status, but it may be too remote from the students to directly affect their values, beliefs, and opportunities. I argue that the corruption that most profoundly affects the student body tends to involve them directly.

As a result of this discussion, two types of educational corruption emerge: corruption that involves students as agents and has direct affect on their values, beliefs, and life chances, and corruption that does not involve students as agents and has limited direct affect on them. To clarify these definitions, consider the following two hypothetical scenarios.

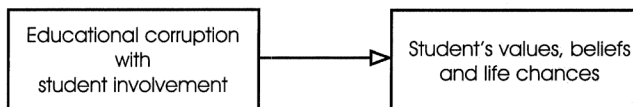
*Situation 1*

A faculty member demands a bribe in exchange for a grade or admission to a university. Consequence: The student faces two choices. If the student cannot pay, then his or her chances of acquiring a university degree are threatened, or the student receives an unfair grade that does not properly reflect his or her knowledge. If the student pays for a grade, it puts him or her in an unfair comparative advantage over other students and develops a belief that there is no need to study to get a good grade. Both of these choices have the potential to mislead possible employers, grant-giving agencies, and other parties interested in students' merits. Ultimately, the result of this situation damages low-income students' future opportunities and nurtures the belief in all students that academic success may be purchased and hard work is a worthless investment.

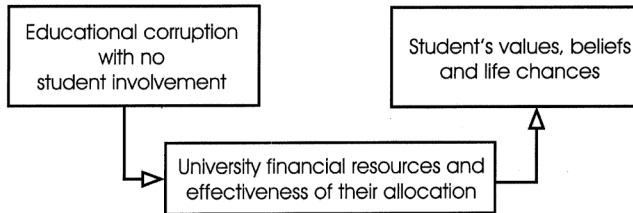
*Situation 2*

An administrator embezzles school funds. Consequence: Public funds are not used effectively, and the overall amount of resources available to the university has diminished. These types of corrupt activities influence students through the damages done to the institution's finances. Fewer scholarships may be available to students, or the quality or quantity of essentials such as books, technology, or equipment available to students may diminish. Although the effect on students is present, it is indirect and realized through various mediating factors. Figures 1a and 1b provide visual representation of the two types of corruption and its effect on students.

a. Model that directly involves student.



b. Model that does not directly involve student.



*Figure 1.* Models of the consequences of educational corruption.

## Educational Corruption That Directly Involves Students

The remaining discussion on taxonomy of corruption is focused on corruption that involves students as agents and is termed, from now on, *education-specific corruption*. Although identification of a subset of corrupt activities that involve students as agents of corruption is a useful tool for analysis, it does not provide sufficient precision in definitions. Students may be involved in many different subcategories of education-specific corruption. A student may be asked to, or voluntarily offer to, pay a bribe to a faculty member for a grade or to pass an exam; a student may be coerced by an administrator to pay a “fee” for a good grade on a number of examinations (this may be paralleled with cases when a student seeks an administrator’s help to obtain satisfactory grades), or a student may be asked to pay a bribe to a librarian for the right to borrow a book. Depending on the participants involved in education-specific corruption, I distinguish between the following types of educational corruption: student–faculty exchange, student–administrator exchange, and student–staff exchange. Examples of all types can be found in Table 1.

Student–faculty exchange occurs in the classroom, admissions (this is especially pertinent to educational systems where faculty are involved in admission processes), examinations, and routine tests. Material gifts, monies, and favors get exchanged for grades and other academic achievements. By definition, participants in this exchange are students and professors. The exchange may be either student driven or professor driven.

Student–staff exchange occurs in the area of student services such as in the library, in the student dormitories, the acquisition of transcripts, and gaining access to student benefits (stipends or scholarships, discounted tickets for recreational events, etc.). Material gifts, monies, and favors are exchanged for favors to obtain access to student services. By definition, the participants involved in this type of corruption are students and members of the staff. It may be student driven or staff driven.

Student–administrator exchange may occur both in academic and service areas. By definition, the participants are students and administrators. The objects of exchange are academic achievements and privileges in using student services and receiving favorable treatment from the administration. The currency of exchange may be monies, gifts, and favors. When an administrator charges a student for a guaranteed admission into the university, we say that an exchange occurred in the academic area of the university. When an administrator charges a student for a guaranteed spot in a university dormitory (this is especially relevant to the countries where dormitory access is limited), this is classified as corruption occurring in the



## *Taxonomy of Corruption in Higher Education*

Table 1

*Examples of Categories of Educational Specific Corruption*

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Area of Occurrence</i>
Student–faculty exchange	Student offers money for examination grade that professor accepts and gives a good grade to the student although he or she does not know the subject.	Academic corruption
	Faculty member sells a student a term paper.	Academic corruption
	Professor gives a low grade to a student who knows the subject and recommends private tutoring. Later he/she passes the student regardless of how much the student learned.	Academic corruption
Student–administrator exchange	An administrator “helps” a slow learner to obtain good grades in all subjects by ordering relevant faculty members to grade him or her favorably. Student pays an administrator a “service fee.”	Academic corruption
	Administrator charges student’s family a fee for guaranteed admission to his or her university.	Academic corruption
	Administrator charges student a fee for guaranteed access to the university dormitory with limited space availability bypassing the official process.	Corruption in services
Student–staff exchange	A librarian charges student a fee for the right to borrow a book, when the number of copies of this book is limited.	Corruption in services
	An administrative assistant charges a student for transcripts that are supposed to be free of charge.	Corruption in services
	Student services representative charges a student a fee for guaranteed tickets of limited availability to a major recreational event.	Corruption in services

area of student services. Full taxonomy of corruption in higher education is presented in Figure 2.

Although at first it may seem that the last category is an extension of the first two, it is, in fact, different. Student–administrator exchange clearly sets aside the cases of corruption that are mediated by administrators as opposed to those initiated by professors or staff members. Cases involving a faculty member deciding to take a bribe in exchange for an undeserved grade raises issues regarding norms of academic profession as well as formal and informal codes of conduct (Goode, 1957) and professional misconduct (Braxton & Bayer, 1999). Cases involving the coercion or invitation to collaborate with a faculty member by an administrator to give an undeserved grade demand a

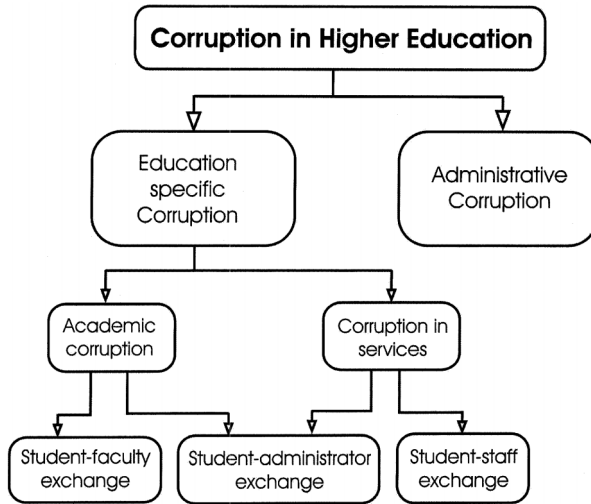


Figure 2. Taxonomy of corruption in higher education.

discussion on administrative ethics, quality of leadership, and distribution of power between administrators and professionals. A similar (but not identical) distinction may be drawn in cases when administrators bypass, coerce, or collaborate with staff members on education-specific corruption. Although both staff and administrators violate the law when engaged in corruption, involvement of an administrator indicates the depth of penetration of corruption in the organization and decayed leadership of the university. It is clear that this distinction has consequences for future studies in educational corruption as well as choices of intervention mechanisms.

Three types of education-specific corruption possess similarities that allow for grouping them into two categories based on the area where exchanges occur. First, student-faculty exchange and some cases of student-administrator exchange occur in the area directly related to academic activities. These cases might be grouped into a category termed *academic corruption*. On the other hand, student-staff and some cases of student-administrator exchange occurs in the area of student services and may be termed *corruption in services*.

### Educational Corruption That Does Not Involve Students as Agents

Corruption that does not directly involve students is demonstrated by the following examples: corruption in procurement, corruption in hiring,

and the misuse of public funds for private purposes (to name a few). These are described as *administrative corruption*. The importance of understanding this type of corruption cannot be emphasized enough due to the consequences it tends to bear on educational systems. It is likely to lead to financial waste and misallocation of resources. At the same time, administrative corruption is qualitatively different from corruption involving students because it is not education specific. Unlike corruption unique to education, administrative corruption does not imply direct student contact with illegal activities. It affects students indirectly. In this respect, it resembles corruption in public and private enterprises (e.g., politics, banking, state oil companies). Administrative corruption has gained substantial interest in the literature and has been a primary focus of research in this area.

### Conclusions

Corruption in higher education is a worldwide occurrence and particularly common in developing countries. It has detrimental consequences on the quality of education, the student's morals, the future opportunities for students, and quality of future leadership. Although corruption is widespread, the issue has not gained substantial attention by scholars in the field of higher education. As a result, the complexity of educational corruption has not been fully addressed in the literature. However, understanding the nature and the structure of corruption in higher education is essential if any research is to be done in this area.

This article builds on the available literature and author's knowledge to construct a new taxonomy describing corruption in higher education by distinguishing education-specific and general (administrative) corruption. Five overlapping subcategories were identified within education-specific corruption depending on the participants involved in the act of exchange and the area of its occurrence. Different types of corruption may require different theoretical and methodological approaches if research is to be conducted on educational corruption. This taxonomy deconstructs educational corruption and serves as a tool for further research.

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