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Social Problems of Modern Russian Higher Education: The Example of Corruption

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Abstract

Higher education is an essential element in developing a country's innovative potential, and this has been recognised as such by politicians and those who work in the industry. However, one of the blights of contemporary Russian society, corruption threatens the potential of the next generation. Corruption has permeated all levels of society, including the education sector. It is having a profound effect and is replicating the physical and psychological conditions. This article details the scale and nature of corruption in higher education in Russia, and offers some insight into the various proposals that seek to change the situation for the better.

Keywords: Russia, higher education, corruption, ethics

1. Introduction

Corruption is deeply embedded in Russian society in terms of being a physical practice and a psychological expectation, it has developed cultural and 'traditional' (i.e. as a 'normal' practice) roots (Heyneman et al., 2008; Osipian, 2012). According to a 2012 Open Government report (Note 1) Russians perceived higher education to be the fourth most corrupt sector in the country, after traffic police, security forces and community facility agencies. The whole educational sector (from kindergarten to professional education) is worth an estimated US\$5.5 billion annually (Note 2). The level of corruption has been steadily increasing, in spite of different efforts to try and stem the problem (Note 3). One of the centres of cultural production (Note 4) is a country's education system, which conveys values and norms to the next generation of citizens. Therefore, the study of various problems within the education system, including corruption, takes on an urgent dimension.

This article seeks to map the current problem of corruption in Russia's higher education system, and shall seek to explore different ways to try and escape the vicious cycle in which the industry currently finds itself trapped. In order to achieve these objectives, as a first step, the question what is the nature of corruption (in terms of its physical and psychological manifestations) is posed? The next step is to determine, what are the necessary steps needed to break the current hold exerted by corruption?

As a starting point, the article shall define the nature of corruption on education from a generic theoretical perspective. What does corruption look like in the education system? How does corruption affect the education system? The material shall be drawn from academic work and the results of expert workshops that have been held on the issue. With the issue theoretically defined, the article moves to the issue of the nature and effect of corruption on higher education in Russia. The underlying reasons for the existence and persistence of corruption are explored. In addition, possible avenues for breaking the cycle of corruption are also investigated and proposed.

2. Corruption in Education: A Theoretical Perspective

There are two possible theoretical paths to view the issue of corruption in the education system. The first path is to view the issue from legal and economic standpoint. What laws are violated? How much is the total value, in terms of absolute value and opportunity cost, is corruption costing the education system and society? Another path to take is to view the problem from an ethical and moral dimension. How does corruption affect the moral and spiritual dimensions of those interacting with the education system? What are the social responsibilities of the education system towards its students (from the perspective of students gaining places or qualifications that

they are not entitled to)? All of these factors can adversely affect the brand and reputation (and therefore the value) of higher education.

Many different definitions of corruption are in existence. At the most basic level of definition, it is the “abuse of authority for material gain” (Anechiarico & Jacobs, 1996). In a similar, although more developed understanding, corruption is described as being “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). Yet another definition offers corruption as being “the exchange of wealth for power, where the power is rooted in the public position” (Jain, 2001). There are connections between the existence of corruption and the stability of political systems, the existing legal framework, the transparency of public information, level of accountability of individuals and institutions, and the efficiency of the existing mechanisms of governance (Hallack & Poisson, 2005, p. 2). According to Russian legislation, corruption is defined as the “use by an official of his/her powers, contrary to the interests of the civil service, if this deed has been committed out of mercenary or any other personal interests and has involved a substantial violation of the rights and interests of individuals or organisations, or the legally protected interests of the society or the State” (Denisova-Schmidt & Leontyeva, 2013, p. 56). Corruption therefore involves some form of transaction with a ‘client’ and with the collusion of an agent from a public office that is done for private gain.

Corruption can also be classified according to the level and scale that takes place. A distinction can be made between “petty” corruption and “systemic/institutional political” corruption. Petty corruption “does not endanger the state and is capable of being dealt with by the political process” (Temple & Petrov, 2004, pp. 85-86). However, corruption at the systemic/institutional political level “undermines a society’s health, so making it recognisably diseased to the point that its ordinary politics cannot do anything about it” (Foster, 2001). Therefore a difference exists insofar as to whether corruption is superficial and occasional or something that is deeply rooted in society.

Some believe that corruption in education differs somewhat from the issue and nature of corruption in general (Hallack & Poisson, 2001, p. 58), which has prompted efforts to develop taxonomy of corruption (Rumyantseva, 2005). Corruption has been broken down to specific services/functions—in selection, in accreditation, in procurement, skimming from project grants, private tutoring, selling admissions and grades, ghost teachers, influencing personnel appointments, professional misconduct, in educational property and taxes. The issue of corruption has also been broken down to different levels and groups—Ministry of Education, region-district, school level, classroom-teacher level, and international agencies (Rumyantseva, 2005, p. 84; Hallack & Poisson, 2005; Heyneman et al., 2008). Thus there is a clear distinction between corruption in education that involves some level of favouritism and another form that involves the purchase of some form of grade or qualification.

Rumyantseva has developed taxonomy of corruption in education. One of the categories is referred to as *education-specific corruption*. This form involves students as agents and has a direct impact upon their held beliefs, values as well as life chances. It can involve the payment of a “fee” for good grades, for example. The other taxonomy of corruption in education is *administrative corruption*. This form has an impact upon the educational system, through waste of resources and/or misallocation, but it may not have any direct student involvement in the process (2005: 85-91). In this regard, corruption comes in many different shapes and forms in the education sector.

The research project *Ethics and Corruption in Education*, launched by the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), had three key basic assumptions. 1) Monopoly of power and lack of accountability mechanisms favour the development of corrupt practices in the education sector. 2) Actors’ behaviours (intangible inputs) have a significant impact on problems of access, of quality and of equity in education. 3) Facilitating access to information and promoting a “citizens voice” are essential for improving transparency and accountability in the use of educational resources (Hallack & Poisson, 2005, pp. 2-3). Corruption affects the aspects of both equality and equity in education, which ultimately affect the brand and reputation of a country as education and knowledge form key components of soft power (Simons, 2013, 2014).

3. The Nature and Effect of Corruption in Russian Higher Education

We would like to define corruption in order to understand what corruption is in education and how dangerous it can be. Corruption, as defined by the Federal Law of the Russian Federation # 273-FZ as of 25.12.2008 “On Corruption Counteraction” is considered as a crime in the form of abusing by a physical person the rights related to his/her official position, “in defiance of the legitimate interests of the society and the State for the purpose of profiting in the form of money, valuables, other property or services of material nature, other rights of property for oneself or for third parties, or illegal provision of such benefits to the said person by other physical persons”

(Article 1) (Note 5).

Corruption in any form leads to the degradation of the society, as it facilitates the enrichment of a few and the moral degradation of large groups of people. As a result of historical and cultural factors many illegal structures in Russia have institutionalized to a greater extent than in many other industrialised countries. In addition to the corruption of the economic and political spheres the everyday corruption has significantly expanded, and today it has covered a number of social subsystems. The institution of education in Russian society is also strongly influenced by corruption factor. In many schools and universities the corruption is done in an open manner. The results of various studies demonstrate that corruption in Russian society flourishes in all spheres of life and unfortunately all attempts by the government to deal with this social phenomenon do not lead to any effective results. A part of the public consciousness is to widely believe that today no one can be admitted to the universities without an acquaintance or certain connections or without a fee. Such practice is regarded as quite usual and “normal,” which is why it does not cause internal protest or disapproval. Thus, the study of Roshchina (2002) shows that 57 percent of the parents are willing to give a bribe, since it is regarded merely as a form of costs related to education of their children—normally they would pay formal fees for the education itself, and informal fees as an admission fees for the chance to get free education.

In the book “Shadow Russia”, written by Timofeev and Lyamkin (2000), a whole section is devoted to corruption in higher educational institutions, including the so called “enrolment market” and “tests market”. Among other researchers related to the subject of bribes in educational institutions, it is important to mention the research of INDEM Fund (2002) on the abundance of corruption in Russia, and the centre of social prognosis under the leadership of Sherega (2002), which gives an overview of shadow economic developments and the assessment of the corruption level in higher education.

Nowadays corruption has a quite systematic form. Recent data show that every second student is facing corruption (Note 6). “Out of the total number of students in 2008/2009 academic year, amounted to 7.513 million people - and this is the largest number of student intake for the whole history of Russia - more than 3.250 million students faced corruption” (Note 7). Thus, the corruption component of the whole industry could be compared with the budget of a small country.

The author carried out a sociological research in the universities of Kazan in 2010 (the sample was 400 respondents, students from various state and private institutions). (Valentina, please explain here how you organised and conducted your sociological research—by focus group, face to face interviews, questionnaires, who did you interview—what course, name universities, structured/semi-structured or unstructured interviews...etc.?) In order not to violate the ethics of the research and to obtain the representative information, we asked the respondents a range of indirect questions such as “do you think your friends or acquaintances legally enrolled in universities?” or “how often do your fellow students give gifts to your teachers?” and so on. As a result of the responses, we received the following data. Only a half of the respondents (46.6 per cent) presume that it is easier to enrol a higher educational institution in the standard way (“to take an exam and win the competition”). The number of choices between the following responses were practically even: “to prepare for the academic competitions and win the first prize”—15.3 per cent, “pay the right person from the admissions board”—13.6 per cent, “use your connections or those of your parents”—11.9 per cent. It means that 25 per cent, which is a quarter of the total number of respondents, believe that illegal methods of entry are required. And only a small number of respondents speak frankly about the idea of buying for money: the Unified State Exam results—5.9 per cent, medical statement showing your disability—5.1 per cent, and first prize in the academic competition—1.7 per cent.

Thus, we can make a conclusion that 40 per cent of respondents prefer to use illegal methods of enrolling in the universities. This is an alarming number that characterizes the negative processes in the Russian society. Unfortunately society has become accustomed to massive corruption, and regards it as being normal. (Valentina please add here the results of similar sociological research conducted in other Russian cities. What other studies in Russian are available to cite? Are the results similar or different from your findings in Kazan? Add one or two paragraphs here)

Many types of corruption are similar to fraud committed by an official, and are classified as crimes against the state. The risk of corruption in education lies in the disorientation of citizens involved in the process, and uncivil form of communication comes out automatically as a result which serves as a fertile ground for the onward breeding of corruption and the total degradation in all other sectors and spheres of life of the society.

Corruption in Russian higher education follows the different types that were enumerated within the section on theoretical aspects. Some of those forms that have been identified include admissions, graduation, personnel (recruitment, tenure, promotion, etc.), public research commissions, private research commissions, publications

and plagiarism, conference participation and consulting (Denisova-Schmidt & Leontyeva, 2013, pp. 57-58; Osipian, 2012, pp. 159-161; Klein, 2011). In general, currently there are no codes of conduct regarding corruption, no special office within university administrations for corruption problems, and no internal supervision process (Denisova-Schmidt & Leontyeva, 2013, p. 58). As such, it leaves the system very vulnerable to corruption at an individual and institutional level. Let's take a look at the basic forms of corruption in higher education:

- giving bribes to the inspection bodies for the accreditation of the university;
- improper use of federal funds;
- purchase of a diploma through authorized persons from university or intermediaries;
- extortion demands by professors during the exam session (excessive demands for examinations, tests);
- solicitation by professors of paid consultations, their own manuals or books for students;
- pressure created by students through paying a bribe instead of studying a subject;
- pressure on professors by their colleagues or administration in order to obtain an examination or test. (Note 8)

The above confirms the types and nature of corruption from academic research. The issue of corruption is a hot topic in the mass media. Corruption can come in the form of voluntary corruption, such as the case of a dean at Moscow State University accepting a bribe of euro 30000 for a PhD admission (Note 9). It can also come in the form of coercion, such as a personal friend who was 'advised' to pay euro 2000 for him to be able to defend his doctoral thesis at a university in Moscow. In 2007, according to the Economic Crimes Unit of the Moscow Police, some 30-40 professors are caught each year for accepting bribes for good grades, and at least 30 cases over a five-year period where university administrative staff accepted bribes for admissions (Note 10). This represents a significant and deep rooted abuse of position and trust, not to mention giving a hint as to the large scale of the problem.

4. Underlying Reasons for Corruption and the Way Forward

The distinctive feature of corruption in education is that it spreads to almost all levels of relations (from supervisors and technicians to senior management of the ministries and agencies). In 1986 the Soviet Union spent 9.6 per cent of its GDP on education, by 2000 the Russian Federation spent a mere 2.9 per cent of GDP on education (Klein, 2011: 6). This had the effect of financially starving education service providers and forcing them to look for funding from any source or form. There are a number of reasons for extensive expansion of corruption in Russia's education system, these have been given in the previous section, the following is intended to serve as a consolidated overview based upon the works cited and the findings of the fieldwork conducted in Kazan among students:

1) Lack of adequate wages for teachers.

In the western economic tradition it is assumed that the teacher's remuneration consists of financial remuneration and academic interest (pleasure from teaching, flexible schedule, the ability to work in multiple locations, to be engaged in a creative process and etc.). In Russia, the academic remuneration is significantly reduced, due to the pressure of a huge bureaucratic burden of the reforms in educational system enacted by the government of the Russian Federation. Therefore there is a big bureaucratic burden for teachers in addition to low wages (for example, on average a lecturer in a Russian university gets paid 400 Euro per month).

2) Low status of a teacher in the society.

The profession of a teacher and its social status carries little or no respect in society. Moreover, there is an opinion that those people tend to become teachers who "did not find their place" in commercial companies or in the sphere of public administration (i.e. not good enough for the private sector).

3) The established way of obtaining tests or examinations with certain schemes and rules.

A teacher's reluctance to pander to these schemes can cause negative attitudes among his/her colleagues. This pattern can be named as "corruption spiral": the information about the existing order is passed from one person to another, from graduate students to junior students. Thus, the order established once is maintained on a perpetual basis.

4) Demoralization in society and the spread of corruption in all spheres.

Unfortunately, society does not judge both bribe takers and bribe givers. Moreover, the capability of giving a bribe in some cases is encouraged, and is given as a credit to a person.

5) The increasing number of so called “pseudo-students”.

Recently a significant layer of pseudo-students has developed due to a variety of factors. First of all, it is fostered by unemployment. Unable to find appropriate jobs, young people are pushed in to higher educational institutions. Secondly, a big number of young men enroll the universities to purposely avoid serving in the army. Thirdly, a lot of students are forced to work because of the difficult financial situation and have to compensate for their poor academic performance and attendance by giving bribes.

6) Low interest of Russian society in quality education.

In many society levels there is a fundamental lack of understanding of the importance and effectiveness of education, deep and complex knowledge. This is particularly expressed in the formal requirements of institutions, organizations and even private companies to the level of education of its employees and staff. Even governors and mayors are being caught in buying fake diplomas.

7) Increased economic pressure on universities.

States around the world cut financial support for higher educational institutions. Even the most prestigious universities are busy with increasing the cost-effectiveness of their activities. Commercial reasons become the priority and driving factor in academia. And since only a few institutions are able to provide an adequate income in these newly established conditions, the rest is left mired deep in corruption.

This leaves the question, how can this cycle be broken? A number of methods and attempts have been made. One of the assumed ways to reduce corruption is through decentralisation and privatisation. However, studies have cast doubt upon the effectiveness of these methods. “With on-going trends such as decentralisation, privatisation and sub-contracting, one would expect an automatic reduction in corrupt practices in education. Unfortunately, the reality shows the contrary in many cases: the increasingly complex nature of the education sector simply appears to be creating new opportunities for corruption” (Hallack & Poisson, 2005: 3). This observation is also confirmed by Temple and Petrov (2004: 97) in their study of corruption in the higher education sector in Russia and Azerbaijan. With regard to the issue of reforms, Osipian notes:

Moreover, the mass corruption in higher education was actually triggered by the state with the introduction of market reforms. The state attempted introducing elements of financial sustainability and partial self-funding and allowed private universities, but preserved the centralised system of regulation and control. As a result, these two forces, the market incentives for independent producers and centralised government control, clash continuously and breed corruption (2012: 161).

Thus, poorly conceived or narrow reforms in the education sector are not only ineffective, but can be counter-productive in their effect on corruption. The situation created by the above reforms merely served to entrench the problem, perhaps going as far as to create new opportunities to exploit.

5. Conclusion

According to the level of corruption, petty or systemic/institutional, the material above denotes the more severe variant is currently affecting the higher education system in Russia. This means that it is not something occasional and cannot be dealt with in the ‘normal’ political process and structure, an extraordinary effort is required to break the cycle and system of embedded corruption. The current system displays both of Rumyantseva’s categorisations of corruption, the administrative and education specific forms, it permeates all levels of the sector. Professor Ruslan Shulga from the Department of Civil Society at MGIMO states that only a “root and branch” reform of the entire university system is required. He recommends that there is a need to reduce the number of educational establishments, to increase spending on education, adopting a more impartial system of evaluation and creating special mechanisms such as hotlines and watchdogs in universities. However, cultural and bureaucratic blocks still exist in society. “Even if the government can agree on an effective plan, implementation is some way off. In the meantime, corruption will continue to blight the country” (Note 11). The broach approach to reform is also supported by Klein, requiring the additional active participation of journalists and civil society (2011), if there is to be any chance of success. Thus we can draw the following conclusions based on the analysis made about the spread of corruption in Russian society:

- 1) Corruption is widely spread in modern Russian educational system which leads to the degradation of the country that counteracts attempts at modernization. Corruption is evenly distributed in private and state institutions.
- 2) The most significant reason of corruption is the low quality of school preparation, which does not help the

students to be well prepared for the entry examinations.

3) Erosion of the constitutional principle of equal opportunities. This principle is commonly referred to as “free education.” That means that the starting capabilities are not initially equal, which is divided between those who can and cannot pay the ‘necessary’ bribes.

4) It leads to the moral and ethical degradation of society as a whole.

5) Lack of objectivity, integrity and high ethical standards in the universities which leads to deprivation of public support for higher educational institutions. Increased corruption discredits the quintessence of university education.

6) Corruption lowers the level of knowledge, hence deteriorates the quality of human capital and potential of society.

7) It is important to take the following measures to fight the corruption:

-improve the quality of schooling;

-improve financial and moral motivation of teachers in high-quality preparation of students;

-restrict control by regulatory bodies over universities;

-improve the corruption counteraction legislation.

The aspects of ethical education and ethics in education can be mutually reinforcing, to create individuals and institutions that are free or at least minimise the blight of corruption (Hallack & Poisson, 2005, p. 4). Currently the situation replicates the physical and psychological conditions that merely replicate and produce a continuation of the status quo in corruption within the next generation of citizens. Ordinary people have a complicated relationship with corruption, on the one hand, it is something that is despised. Yet they are also resigned to and engage in the process (Temple & Petrov, 2004, p. 92) and therefore perpetuate the system. This is supported by the findings of the sociological research that was conducted among students enrolled in higher education in Kazan.

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Notes

- Note 1. Go to <http://xn--80abeamcuufxbhgound0h9cl.xn--p1ai/events/1268/> for the report (in Russian).
- Note 2. Come, A., Corruption, corruption, corruption, Open Democracy, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/augusto-come/corruption-corruption-corruption>, 29 November 2012 (accessed 15 April 2014).
- Note 3. 1) Vorotnikov, E., Russia: Rising Corruption Threatens Universities, University World News, <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20100514205552600>, 16 May 2010 (accessed 15 April 2014)
- 2) Samedova, E. & Ostaptschuk, M., Russia: An Educational System in Crisis, DW, <http://www.dw.de/russia-an-educational-system-in-crisis/a-15906118>, 3 May 2012 (accessed 15 April 2014)
- Note 4. The other centres of cultural production are the parliament, armed forces, mass media and religion.
- Note 5. Federal Law of the Russian Federation "On Corruption Counteraction" # 273-FZ as of 25.12.2008.
- Note 6. Corruption process in Russia: level, structure, trends. Corruption increase rate within four years' period as a result of the recent survey made by the INDEM Fund//INDEM Foundation.20.05.2010// http://www.indem.ru/en/Publicat/2005diag_engV.htm.
- Note 7. The educational institutions of higher professional education//Federal service of state statistics. 20.05.2010//http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b09_12/IssWWW.exe/stg/d01/08-10.htm.
- Note 8. V. Kulikov, The rating of bribe-takers, The Russian newspaper-No 13 (4837) as of 29.01.2009, p. 7.
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- Note 11. Come, A., Corruption, corruption, corruption, Open Democracy, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/augusto-come/corruption-corruption-corruption>, 29 November 2012 (accessed 15 April 2014).

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