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Term paper

**Corruption, professional culture and regulatory framework of
universities: what is the relationship? Research design for a study of
universities in countries in transition**

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Introduction

Following the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the communist block more than a decade ago many countries in Easter and Central Europe as well as in Central Asia have entered a period of rapid changes and innovations in economic and social sectors. The changes which were meant to be positive and implemented for better have not always turned out to be so. The new epoch, the epoch of transition as it is often called, along with hopes for a new life brought many problems and preoccupations to newly independent societies. Among others there are economic stagnation and crisis, financial

austerity of governmentally run social institutions, including that of higher education. In summary, transition period has brought hardship, confusion and disappointment in many people's lives.

One of the problems that have arisen in former communist countries is flourishing of corruption. The phenomenon of corruption is not unique to these countries and in no way it is a special characteristic of the transition period. Nevertheless, although there is no solid data available on the degree of change of frequency in corrupt practices in current period in comparison to the Soviet period, the general perception is that corruption grew substantially across many countries in the region during the transition period, and ultimately became a social norm. (e.g. Miller, 2001)

Corruption became ubiquitous, penetrated all spheres of social life, including that of higher education. And in higher education, it flourished in various forms and types caused by various reasons and leading to a variety of consequences. This paper concentrates primarily on classroom level corruption that hides in teacher-student relationships and has substantially dangerous consequences on the development of a nation.

The main goal of the paper is to develop a research design for a study of supposed antecedents of corruption in higher education and their relation to various measure of degree of corruption, mainly corruption perception. The paper is organized into the following sections. Chapter I elaborates the phenomenon of corruption and its potential reasons. Chapter II introduced a conceptual framework on the relationship between supposed antecedents of corruption and corruption itself. Chapter III concentrates on development of research questions and hypotheses to be tested in the study. Chapter IV

covers strategies for operationalization of various conceptual issues into quantifiable variables and touches upon the methods of data collection. The findings and policy recommendations are left out for until the study is actually conducted.

I. Statement of a problem

Since the times when the Soviet Union fell apart the situation in higher education sector in the transition countries has continued to deteriorate. Higher education traditionally was a state responsibility for decades. Now the state is able to contribute fewer and fewer resources into higher education institutions. Facilities, book collections and equipment have depreciated either morally or physically and require substantial investment. Faculty salaries have dropped down enormously and often are not able to satisfy minimum survival needs. All this endangers the quality of education in most institutions of higher learning. Corruption is another major contributor into this process in transition countries.

Corruption is often understood as an abuse of authority for material gain of personal nature (e.g. see Nye, 1967; Anechiarico and Jacobs, 1996) or as an exchange of power for material resources (Jain 2001) or it is often narrowly defined by general public as bribery. It is important to interpret corruption accurately so that the definition would capture a high degree of variation in corrupt practices. The kind of corruption that interferes in teacher-student relationship is difficult to limit to one particular definition. It would include abuse of authority for personal gain, both material and others, exchange of power to give grades and other types of academic evaluations for material gifts and non-material favors. It will also include situations when a teacher does not abuse the authority but passively accepts a bribe offered by unprepared students at the examination session or

when a teacher feels pressure to do so because a student has powerful relatives. It may as well include many more situations that we are presently unaware about and, what leaves us a lot room for pursuing the truth about corruption.

How do we know corruption exists? *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is one of the sources of anecdotal stories about teacher-student type of corruption in the transition countries, local newspapers in many of the transition countries serve as an evidence, personal stories and information obtained from formal interviews that I have conducted during my visit to Kazakhstan in the Spring of 2003, the results of a survey of higher education institutions conducted by Transparency Kazakhstan (2003) all contribute towards the evidence of existence of higher education corruption.

Why does corruption exist? This is the central question I plan to address in this paper. The reasons for existence of corrupt practices of university teachers are very complex and must rest in several major domains of analysis. The first domain is the existence (or non-existence) of profession and professional culture among faculty members. The second domain is the degree of centralization of higher education system, degree of autonomy of higher education institutions from the state, degree of centralization within an organization (e.g. college or university) and degree of professional autonomy of faculty members from university administrators and the rest of the society. The degree of professional autonomy that faculty members enjoy in turn is tightly linked to the notion of profession and professional culture. In fact, the two major domains are related to one another.

II. Conceptual Framework

Higher education is a complex enterprise and to narrow its functions and goals down I will primarily concentrate on teaching. One of the important functions of higher education is production of qualified specialists for the needs of the society.

Consequentially, one of the main functions (narrowly defined) of a faculty member acting as a teacher is to assure that he/she effectively fosters the learning process of students, to assess how successful was a particular learning experience and produce a quantifiable measure of the learning outcome so that others can rely upon that measure (typically a grade) in various decision making processes. The fact that a faculty member possess a certain type of esoteric and rather complex knowledge makes him/her capable of teaching the students and assessing outcomes. The society (employers, other educational institutions, governmental agencies etc.) has to rely upon the assessment outcomes.

The reason a society accepts universities professors' assessment of students' learning outcomes is because it trusts their professional judgment. The fact that university professors constitute a profession implies that they in their behavior widely rely upon formal and informal social control mechanisms (Braxton, 1986; Braxton, Bayer & Finkelstein, 1992) and if so, this control mechanisms or professional norms prevent faculty members from abusing there power.

But what if professional norms are not followed? What if they are violated frequently and the trust of the society is betrayed, thereof? Can it still rely on professional norms as a major regulatory instrument? Can it trust university professors' who do not follow norms of professional culture and habitually exploit their power?

What is a professional culture? Clark portrays the culture of academic profession in the following way: all academic men and women “are part of a single ‘community of scholars’, sharing an interest that sets them apart from others. Community members are entitled to special privileges, particularly ‘freedom of research’ and ‘freedom of teaching’. Downgrading all external controls, the culture of the profession everywhere emphasizes personal autonomy and collegial self-government. It portrays altruistic commitment, suggesting that it is a high form of service to society to create knowledge, transmit the cultural heritage, and train the youth to fulfill their highest potential.” (Clark, 1983)

Clark’s definition of professional culture contains several major elements: shared beliefs, altruistic commitment and high degree of autonomy. The motive of professionalism and professional culture crosses with that of autonomy in other studies. For instance, Blau states that the most important similarity between people in academics and other professions is “the significance of professional and academic autonomy and self regulation” academics possess. (Blau, 1973) Autonomy granted to a group of people who possess an esoteric unified body of knowledge is what distinguishes the profession.

What happens to a group of people who possess an esoteric unified body of knowledge but are stripped of autonomy as a result of bureaucratization? Do they still constitute a profession and regulate their behavior by professional norms? Debbler (1982) in his “The Proletarianization of the Profession: a Review Essay” summarizes major theories and empirical studies that attempt to relate bureaucratization to the state of profession. A group of theories of the professional-managerial class regards professionals as vulnerable to a “proletarianization” in which they lose control and power over their

own work. (Deber, 1982, p. 21) The results of empirical studies summarized by Deber report growing discontent among professionals in response to rationalization and loss of control over their working conditions. (Deber, 1982, p. 22) Perhaps, the discontent provoked by high degree of bureaucratization may convert into disappearance of profession as it is defined by Clark, if professional autonomy is completely taken away for the professors for several generations.

What are the conditions that may affect the degree of professional autonomy available to faculty members in colleges and universities? My hypothesis is that it is negatively affected by the level of centralization of higher education system.

Centralization (or decentralization if evaluated for the opposite standpoint) in higher education is a rather broad concept and requires further elaboration. Bain (2001) in her dissertation on “University Autonomy in the Russian Federation since Perestroika” provides interesting conceptual framework for analyzing different dimensions of decentralization in higher education. Bain’s framework together with theoretical considerations of Blau (1973) provide as with three dimensions of decentralization.

The first dimension of decentralization issue is located along the university-state relationship line. It basically deals with the government structure and distribution of authority between the different levels of government as it relates to higher education. Decentralization thus is defined as the devolution of control from the central or national government to regional governments. (Johnstone and Bain, p. 5, 2002)

The second dimension of decentralization has to do with university autonomy, “or the freeing of the university for some measures of governmental authority or control”. (Johnstone and Bain, p. 6, 2002) Bain (2001) in her dissertation differentiates between

two types of university autonomy: autonomous universities as social organizations with specific functions (traditionally those of research, teaching and service and culture); and autonomous universities as economic enterprises driven by cost-consciousness.

The third dimension of decentralization is related to the distribution of authority within a university among administrators and faculty members. (e.g. Blau, 1973) A system may be quite decentralized and a university may be somewhat autonomous but if all the power is concentrated in the hands of administrators then the way things are handled within institutions remain centralized and therefore, academicians hardly may be entitled to substantial professional autonomy. Many research universities in the United States are characterized by a high degree of professional autonomy of academic profession and are even classified by some scholars as professional bureaucracies, organizations that incorporate features of Weberian bureaucracy (Weber, 1922) and at the same time subordinate administrative authority to professional knowledge and expert power located at the bottom of the organization. (Mintzberg, 1979) However, there are other universities within and without the United States, which cannot be described as professional bureaucracies. Faculty members in such universities hardly may be called autonomous and are subject to stricter administrative supervision.

The dimension of decentralization related to professional autonomy also connects to professionalization and professional culture. The central hypothesis in the study of antecedents of corruption in teacher-student relationship is that all the dimensions of decentralization, including its effect on existence of professional culture, influence the degree of corruption in universities in transition countries.

III. Research Questions and Hypothesis

This study of antecedents of corruption in teacher-student relation is meant to be a comparative one. It is expected to capture a certain degree of variation in the levels of centralization, university autonomy and authority distribution within the university; variation in the state of academic profession and strength of professional culture and consequentially, variation in the degree of corruption.

The study addresses several research questions. First, How the degree of centralization at the system level compares across different countries in the sample? Second, how university autonomy compares across the countries in the sample? Third, How centralization of authority within the university compares across different countries in the sample? Fourth, How professional autonomy compares across countries in the sample? And the fifth, How all the factors relate to the degree of corruption in teacher-student relationship in the universities in transition?

Basing on the research questions the study tests several hypotheses.

Hypothesis #1: The level of centralization at the system level is negatively related to the state of academic profession and the strength of academic culture.

The rationale for this hypothesis is derived from the readings reviewed in Chapter II. The more centralized is the governance system of higher education the more authority government may take away from professionals, therefore negatively affecting the state of academic profession and professional culture.

Hypothesis II: The level of institutional autonomy is positively related to the state of academic profession and professional culture.

Supposedly, if universities are more autonomous from the government, the latter interferes less with hiring policies, decisions on faculty salaries, curriculum planning and student recruitment policies not mentioning other areas of organizational control. In case of increased institutional autonomy, some of these areas of control may become responsibility of professionals (e.g. curriculum planning) and thus, enhance their professional status directly, others may serve as instruments that university administrators use to improve faculty quality and strengthen professional values. This is, however, is not necessarily true. As Johnstone and Bain (2002) point out, it may be the case that when universities become more autonomous from the government, the authority distribution within the university may benefit administrators more than faculty members and therefore, lead to further deprofessionalization.

Hypothesis III: The degree to which faculty members have power to control academic affairs in their institution is positively related to their professionalization.

This hypothesis is a direct derivative from the definition of academic profession and was already discussed in Chapter II in sufficient detail.

Hypothesis IV: The degree of professionalization among faculty members is negatively related to the degree of corruption in teacher-student relationship.

Since corruption in any form (e.g. bribery or favor exchange) undermines the primary goal of higher education in general and that of teaching more narrowly, it should not be a part of professional culture of faculty members that are supposed to “portray altruistic commitment” to the goal of education according to Clark’s (1983) definition of professional culture.

IV. Variables and Data Collection

The main goal of the study is to explain cross country variation in the degree of corruption in teacher-student relationship by the variation in degree of centralization present in higher education systems across countries. Therefore, the variables employed in the study should reflect different dimensions of decentralization at the system level, university autonomy and decentralization of authority within the organization of higher education. More elaborated study will be required to operationalize decentralization in each of the layers of the higher education systems. Bain (2001) in her dissertation provides comprehensive literature review that can be used to operationalize decentralization on the system level as well as university autonomy. Bain herself offers useful approaches to desegregation of the broad concept of decentralization. Operationalization of authority distribution within a university may draw upon the work of Blau (1973), Clark (1983), Deber (1982), Mintzberg (1979). Some aspects of authority distribution within a university, where faculty possess a great deal of autonomy may be better understood via interviews with faculty and administrators in a research university in the United States.

The concept of profession and professional culture also will need to be operationalized to the level of measurable variables. Theoretical frameworks developed by Blau (1973), Clark (1983), Braxton (1986) may be used basis for addressing this issue.

The desegregation of the concept of corruption in teacher-student relationship will rely upon data available via mass media in transition other countries regarding specific cases of corruption, materials and results of the study available through Transparency

International and its local branches, interviews with faculty, students and administrators in universities in transition countries, and especially that of Kazakhstan.

The data for the study will be collected through surveys in a number of universities in the countries in transition. The issue of sample selection remains unresolved at this point but it is expected to represent sufficient variation in the degree of centralization in higher education across several countries in transition.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of corruption in higher education and specifically in teacher-student relationship must have very complex system of antecedents which are not totally limited either to the degree of professionalization existing among university professors or the degree of centralization. However, a study of such kind may be a good starting point.

Among other factors that may account for variation in the degree of bribery and favor exchange among faculty and students in the universities in transition countries may be the nature of the field study, the degree of its technical complexity and also the amount of power students are likely to accrue after obtaining a degree, university's location (center or periphery), ethnic diversity, faculty salaries, the ability of faculty members to combine research with teaching, university's prestige, as well as corruption in other social sectors (e.g. political corruption, corruption in medical system, policy, customs etc).

A good study of antecedents of corruption should test several competing hypothesis in order to widen the range of possibilities to find some reasonable explanations for the existence of this phenomenon phenomenon.

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