Ethical Issues in the Slovak higher education

ALENA BUŠIKOVÁ
School of Management, Bratislava, Slovakia

Abstract:
Slovak higher education has a relatively long tradition dating to 1919 when the first University - Comenius University - was established in the former Czechoslovakia. Since then, Slovak higher education underwent tremendous changes and marked a substantial increase in the number of higher education institutions and graduates. Despite of numerous undisputable success stories of this transition, it seems that the Slovak education is still lagging behind other European Union countries in terms of ethical conducts as in the statistics of corruption and protectionism, Slovakia ranks very highly. This paper provides numerous examples of Slovakia pursuing concepts of wrong conduct as enacted by the Slovak Accreditation Commission and Slovak governmental officials. The purpose of this paper is not to criticize but to point at the serious issues which need to be dealt with.

Keywords:
higher education, ethical issues, Slovakia, Accreditation Commission

1 Introduction

Corruption is one of the most serious threats to the stability and development of a civil society. Even though it exists all over the world, it is considered to be a more significant problem in developing countries rather than developed countries. Western Europe and the European Union institutions are not excluded from this epidemic, but in most of the former Eastern Block Countries corruption, in all of its forms, is endemic (Furutan, 2010).

Although the extent of corruption is difficult to determine, corruption indexes have been constructed and used to measure the level of corruption. Perhaps the most valuable is the index constructed by the Transparency International, an international anti-corruption non-governmental organization that publishes data on the perceptions and experience on corruption of people from more than hundred countries all over the world. In their Corruption Perceptions Index 2009 press release, Transparency International ranked Slovakia 56th out of 180 countries that were surveyed. Furthermore, Slovakia has the worst rating of all V4 countries.

In our paper, we focus on the problem of corruption and ethical misconduct in one specific area; the area of higher education in Slovakia.

2 Corruption and ethical misconduct in higher education in general

Corruption in education is a serious problem worldwide as the 2011 Transparency International reports that 35% of the world population considers education in their respective countries to be extremely corrupt (7).

In the course of the past year, the OECD Directorate for Education initiated the Integrity of Education Systems (INTES) project, which focuses on the causes of corruption in education – on identifying the possibilities, the motives and the reasons to engage in malpractice (OECD Education today). The first signs of success of this project are evident in Serbia; other countries to follow.

Table 1 details some of the most common types of irregularities that occur in the education sector.
Table 1 Types of irregularities in the education sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of wrong doings</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>False statements</td>
<td>The wilful falsification of a material fact or a false or fictitious representation, resulting in economic or financial loss to the party to whom the false representation has been made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>False claims</td>
<td>The wilful submission of a claim to the government for money that is underserved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conspiracy</td>
<td>An agreement between two or more persons to perform together an illegal, wrongful or subversive act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conspiracy with regard to claims</td>
<td>An agreement between two or more persons to take joint action to submit a false claim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft/embezzlement</td>
<td>The stealing or retention of funds or property from another party, e.g. the government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bribery/gifts/gratuity</td>
<td>Giving, offering or receiving from a public official or witness an item of value so as to influence an official act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict of interest</td>
<td>A public official accepting a fee to perform official work, or participating in an official activity that may affect their private interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bid rigging</td>
<td>An agreement between bidders on how bids will be submitted or withdrawn so as to create an illusion of competition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Long-term regional training program.

Obviously, these wrong doings are often very difficult to reveal and therefore, difficult to measure. In general, we can separate 3 stages of decision-making in higher education where corrupt practices may emerge. Corrupt decisions can be made (1) during the enrollment process (at entrance exams), (2) during students’ examinations (the exam periods) and (3) in the allocation of costs and benefits of teaching and academic work to individual members of staff. The first two types are related to the relationship between students and institutions whereas the third type relates to the internal institutional regulation and the relationship among staff (including managers) of universities in general (3).

3 Corruption and ethical misconduct in higher education in Slovakia

In Slovakia, corruption and ethical misconduct is the second most pressing area in which people feel compelled to give a bribe. The survey conducted by the Slovak Republic Government Office (Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky) in 2005 also showed that from 1997 to 2005 the level of corruption in Slovakia has risen. Table 2 highlights this rise in four specific and crucial areas in two years increments.

Table 2: Areas where people feel compelled to give a bribe (based on the opinions of the respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>66.62</td>
<td>68.93</td>
<td>66.77</td>
<td>66.89</td>
<td>72.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>28.59</td>
<td>33.72</td>
<td>27.89</td>
<td>32.01</td>
<td>34.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courts</td>
<td>22.51</td>
<td>23.65</td>
<td>26.37</td>
<td>26.18</td>
<td>37.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>14.45</td>
<td>16.71</td>
<td>14.18</td>
<td>17.18</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>4.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to Open Society Institute, bribes seem to be routinely paid for admittance to medical schools (5). Such a conduct sheds a bad light on a medical profession but is common in other study fields as well where the admission is difficult. According to the World Bank & the United States Agency for International Development Diagnostic survey most Slovaks felt that it is impossible to gain admittance to medical or law schools without
paying bribes. Although the most important reason for bribery in the education sector is to gain admittance to schools and universities, many have reported that bribes take place to get better grades (4).

Such a corruption is often criticized in a circle of family or friends but accepted as part of life. In October 2004, a survey conducted by GFK Praha revealed that the level of tolerance for corruption is very high in the former Eastern Block Countries. Slovakia is ranked on the top of the survey in accepting bribes as a natural part of life (4).

3.1 Teachers’s opinions on corruption and cronyism in higher education

The seriousness of the problem has been confirmed by our survey which was conveyed among the teachers and students in order to gather the opinions of people who are the most involved in the education process. The questionnaire was distributed by email to more than 7,818 teachers employed at Slovak universities and more than 9,020 students studying at the Slovak universities with the response rate of 20.23% in case of teacher respondents and 15.61% in case of student respondents. The chart below presents the responses of the teachers whom we asked what reasons they saw behind the lack of success of Slovak institutions’ failure to place highly in Shanghai’s ranking and ranking Times Higher Education.

Chart 1: Slovak teacher’s responses regarding the reasons behind the lack of success of Slovak institutions' failure to place highly in the reputable international rankings.

Source: own survey, 2011

According to the survey, teachers think that the corruption/cronyism is one of the most important reasons why Slovak universities did not place highly in the academic rankings. The low government

---

1 The relevant population was obtained from public data, Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education in Bratislava which reports that there are 12,908 teachers employed at HEIs in Slovakia and approximately 221,669 students studying at HEIs in Slovakia (UIPS, 2010). Email addresses were collected from the Websites of universities. In the body of the email, the recipients were guided by the link to the electronic survey placed on the portal www.surveymonkey.com. This paid service (if more than 10 questions are posed) played a vital role in collecting 1,582 teachers’ responses and 1,408 students’ responses. Most Slovak universities were included in the survey with the exception of a few private universities due to the fact that the email addresses of the teachers of private universities are generally not listed on their Websites (the list of universities is provided in the later stage). Nonetheless, not all respondents answered all questions in the survey, which explains the variation in the number of responses for a particular question. The surveys also provided demographic information which was used to determine that the sample is representative of the population of teachers and students.
support on education and research, the quality of research and the frequent changes in legislations were stated the most often.

In the following chart, the teachers responded on whether they had encountered corruption at their respective universities.

**Chart 2: Slovak teacher’s responses on whether they had encountered corruption and cronyism.**

![Chart](image)

Source: own survey, 2011

Over 34% of the respondents among teachers (multiple choice question) stated that they have encountered corruption or cronyism.

### 3.2 Examples on wrong conduct in terms of Slovak Higher Education

The responses of teachers speak for themselves as the percentage of teachers that encountered corruption or cronyism is high. Since most of the corruption cases are not revealed, the extent of the corruption may be even more serious than the results suggest. In the following section, we attempt to point at several cases of corruption or ethical misconduct across top levels of higher educational system (government and Accreditation Commission). We deem important to state that the level of wrong doing in these cases differs depending on the case, actors and various circumstances and therefore they cannot all be crucified as absolutely unacceptable; rather controversial or disputable. In addition, reader’s beliefs and opinions play a big role in assessing the ethical misconduct in some perplex cases. Our goal is not to embrace all known cases of ethical wrongdoing but to point at several selected cases which should serve as an example of the current state of the Slovak higher education. Furthermore, we hope that addressing these cases will lead to widely open discussion which should, in the long run, serve to decrease the occurrence of the ethical misconducts.

We will point at several cases of ethical misconduct of the Accreditation Committee and the government of the Slovak republic related to the higher education. **Slovak Accreditation Commission**, which is an advisory body of the government of the Slovak Republic. The main task of the Accreditation Commission is to monitor and evaluate the quality of education, research, development, artistic and other creative activities of the universities. The first comprehensive accreditation process was performed in the period of 2008-2011 at all institutions of higher education in Slovakia with the intention to repeat the process every six years according to a prescribed time line. The evaluation follows the afore-mentioned criteria and is based on the self report and the on site visit. The Accreditation Commission has revealed many problematic areas of Slovak universities but till the present day, none of the schools was closed and contrary to the first results, 18 schools were already awarded the status of university (out of the three grades).

The accreditation process in 2008-2011 was the first comprehensive evaluation of institutions of higher education with the objective to differentiate the quality of schools; reward the good ones and punish those,
whose performance was mediocre or insufficient. The results were presented in form of official proceedings on
the web site of the Accreditation Commission, which indicates the transparency.

However, there have also been negative reactions. The main criticism was connected with a retroactive
application which, by some, was viewed as unlawful. The selected criteria were valid only since year 2008, but
they were used to evaluate the performance of the schools back to 2002 (they were applied retroactively and thus
unlawfully). The complaints escalated in the General Prosecutor’s Office. The Ministry of Education refused to
accept the complaint and recommended that the government and the courts reject it too. Frequent changes in the
Slovak legislation related to HEI are generally viewed as a problem for long-term planning. Another major
complaint was that people involved in monitoring are mostly the same people who work in the field that was
being evaluated. Even though the Committee members were excluded from evaluating their own university,
there still might have been some conflict of interest especially since the academic community in Slovakia is
rather narrow.

The criteria of the Accreditation Commission might be quite confusing and some indicators lack the
objectivity. For example, the indicator “attribute of appreciation” does not have any measurable criteria and
therefore is subject for the personal judgment of the evaluators. Other indicators within the same category (e.g.
the requested appearances at the conferences, the memberships in the national and international research
committees, rewards and praises acquired by the faculty and students for their research work) are often viewed as
insufficient indicators of quality of HEI. Academics often criticize the enormous dependency of the whole
program on one person – the guarantor (program director) of the program. If the guarantor decides to leave the
institution, it might lead to a closure of the program. Guarantor of a program can be only a person with
professorship or an associate professor. Currently, there seems to be high demand for these people with a very
limited supply. Ironically, schools whose existence partially depend on the guarantors (professors, associate
professors) themselves determined the criteria to award the professorship or associate professorship which puts
schools that are not eligible to appoint the professors or associate professors into a disadvantage. Moreover,
research has not proven that there is a direct correlation among the academic titles of the faculty
and the excellence in teaching as 64% of students disagree (strongly disagree and slightly disagree combined) with the
statement that a teacher with higher academic titles can teach them more and better (1288 respondents).

Naturally, the students might not be the best evaluators of quality of teaching and this analysis is not sufficient to
conclude that the higher education of teachers does not bring the additional value in the classroom. On the other
side, the percentage of the respondents that disagree with this statement is sufficient enough to start a discussion
about whether there is a correlation among higher educational background of teachers and better teaching and
unless this is confirmed, we suggest the Accreditation Commission to eliminate the criteria that strongly favor
the high academic decrees.

The over-dependency on the high academic decrees is questionable also because of the fact that the
universities themselves set up the criteria to award the professorship and associate professorship decrees to its
faculty. According to our survey, 59% of teachers disagree (strongly disagree and slightly disagree combined)
that “It is ethical that the university which depends also on the guarantors of its programs (associate professors,
professors) determines the criteria to award the associate professorships and professorships” (1393
respondents). The responses of teachers support the change in the criteria of awarding the professorship or
associate professorship decrees. In the open ended question, teachers strongly suggest that the criteria to award
high academic decrees are established by external body (rather than the individual universities). Perhaps then,
the Accreditation Commission could strongly base its evaluation on the academic decrees.

Overall, the Comprehensive Evaluation is rarely viewed as being successful and helpful. Ironically, the exact
three Slovak universities that are considered among the best in Slovakia (e.g. by ARRA) lost the most program
accreditations in between 2010-2011. Altogether 71 program accreditations were taken away by the Slovak
Ministry of Education, out of which 32 program accreditations were taken away from Comenius University, 11
from the Slovak Technical University in Bratislava and 8 from the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice,
mainly because they did not have guarantors for the programs. On one hand, these universities are among the
largest in Slovakia and therefore their chance of losing the accreditation for certain programs is higher; on the
other hand, their departments are among the best (Accreditation Commission, ARRA). The previous Minister of
Education, Jurzyca also confirmed that even the top departments of universities lost the program accreditation
(www.minedu.sk). This fact sheds a bad light on the Accreditation Commission, something that the opinions of
teachers in Slovakia will further confirm.

The following charts provide an overview of the opinions of teachers in Slovakia and their counterparts at
selected foreign universities about the trustworthiness of the national accreditation bodies and the international
rankings.

Chart 3: Opinions of teachers about the trustworthiness of their respective national accreditation bodies
Slovak accreditation body – the Accreditation Committee – is ranked the least trustworthy among all five observed groups of respondents. In addition, teachers expressed their opinions in the open-ended question in our survey and stated, that legislation and the criteria have been frequently changed and appear to be a result of ‘political games’ rather than founded academic discussion.

The governmental officials do not seem to be serving as examples of ethical leaders either as even the top figures of Slovak politics like Jan Figel has drawn negative attention. In 2012, the media has uncovered that Figel was awarded his doctorate via preferential treatment at the time when he was serving as European commissioner. Although he studied a program of social work, the thesis he submitted was a copy of his book written about Slovakia’s integration into the European Union. Moreover, one member of the commission was Jozef Mikloško Jr., son of one of the founding members of KDH.

Figel’s case is not the only one in which the Education Ministry has checked a senior politician’s academic qualifications. Inspectors also looked into Labour Minister Ján Richter’s bachelor’s degree, which Sme reported in May was awarded despite the fact he had studied what was at the time an unaccredited specialisation (Slovak Spectator, 2012).

The university officials have also been involved in a scandal. The rector of the Police Academy, a state-run university-level institution, was even arrested on June 29, 2012 during a police operation prompted by suspicions of irregularities in the defence of diploma theses, problems with use of European funds, and the alleged forgery of academy professors’ signatures. The police also alleged that the rector was complicit in tampering with entrance examination results.

Similarly, shocking case broke out around some ‘express graduates’ in Trencin: a hundred or so students of the Alexander Dubcek University of Trencin completed their courses extraordinarily quickly. According to official records, some of them even took exams there whilst spending a study period abroad. Amongst the students is also the daughter of Daniel Bánoci, president of the economics department. In November 2009, it was reported that Daniela Bánociová graduated in engineering after only nine months by presenting a thesis with a large number of plagiarised passages. In 2003, the same university was shaken by a corruption scandal alleging the favouritism of exam grades during entry math tests, at which some teachers calculated scores in favour of certain applicants. Two other teachers who corrected the tests informed the police of their suspicion that the tests were manipulated and they also sent a note to the Attorney General's Office.

Conclusions
In our paper we focused on the problem of corruption in a specific area – higher education. We identified several cases of wrong conduct with the emphasis on the governmental leaders and the members of Accreditation Commission as these should serve as examples of excellence in ethical leadership. We believe that in order to have an effective and lasting combat of corruption in Slovakia, all such scandals must be punished. Unfortunately, this has not been done in most of the above mentioned cases which sets a wrong impression to students, teachers and whole society that the ethical misconduct is being tolerated in Slovakia. Taking this into account, perhaps we should not wonder that the students often plagiarize on the exams and research papers or that the teachers often grade subjectively. We should not wonder that the students study in order to get a diploma rather than to learn more and the research in Slovakia is more about the quantity rather than quality.

We hope that these examples would contribute to the elimination of corrupt practices in higher education systems.

Bibliography


Contact:
Alena Bušíková, PhD., M.B.A.
Vysoká škola manažmentu v Trenčíne
Panónska cesta 17
Bratislava 85104
abusikova@vsm.sk

---

2 33% of the respondents among students disagreed with the statement that the grading at their school is fair (oral exams, written exams, research papers, etc.)

3 46.9% of the respondents among students stated “I want to get a diploma” as the reason for their studying at the university in comparison to 45% that stated “I want to learn more” (multiple choice question, 1542 respondents)

4 Slovak teachers were asked whether they think research in Slovakia is more about quantity rather than quality. This question was answered by 1,404 teachers of various HEIs. The responses were clear as 89% of teachers think research in Slovakia is more about quantity rather than quality.