

Armenia: College Bribery Rife

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Survey exposes a system of payment for good test and exam results at some universities. A group of ten students at Armenia's State Agrarian University laughed loudly when asked if there was corruption in their college. "How can they do without it?" claimed third-year student Armen.

Now, the issue of alleged bribes being given in order to receive good marks has been brought out into the open after the results of a startling new poll, conducted by the Sargis Tkhruni Youth Student Union, affiliated to Armenia's Social Democratic Party. Out of 2000 students - five per cent of all the students in Armenia - 1821 said that there was corruption in their colleges, according to the survey.

Sargis Tkhruni has already submitted the results of the study to the country's education minister and asked him to take action to tackle the problem.

Education Minister Levon Mkrtchian has been non-committal so far. "We must get an understanding of the quality of this poll," Mkrtchian told IWPR. "If it's been conducted professionally, we will send the results to colleges and ask to have them discussed by these colleges' management boards.

"Definitely, if we are convinced that they are serious and well-founded, and the boards have their say, it is possible that this will raise organisational issues."

The survey appears to have exposed a system of "fixed prices" for tests and exams at some universities.

Lilit, a third-year economics student, said a top exam mark - a "five" - cost 250 US dollars at her faculty, while a "four" could be bought for 200 dollars. "I've never had to pay myself, but I've heard about others who did pay," she said. "It's all a matter of learned habits. If they come to expect to be paid, teachers begin demanding it themselves. Between themselves, they know who will pay and who won't. Out of every 60 students, at least twenty will give a bribe."

Students told IWPR that prices for good exam results at certain colleges ranged between 15,000 and 50,000 drams (between 33 and 135 dollars).

Anna, a second-year student, said teachers tended not to demand a bribe openly, confining themselves to hinting that a student should pay up. "They tire you to death to make you pay," she said.

One student described how palms were greased at his college, "An assistant [lecturer] comes and names the price. The situation is beneficial to us - we pay, if we are unable or don't want to study, and thus escape expulsion."

Students agree that it is possible to resist giving bribes and that there are honest teachers, who refuse to be bought. "There is corruption, but if you study well and give no bribes, no one will ask you to pay anything," said Ruzanna, a political science student. "If you have knowledge and show it, not money, to your teacher, you will pass your exams."

A striking 93 per cent of respondents to the poll suggested that lecturers' salaries should be increased to discourage them from taking bribes.

However, Laert Hovannisian, pro-rector of Yerevan's State Engineering University, said lecturers' salary were not actually so small. "The situation has improved, and the average salary amounts to 87,000 drams (230 dollars)," he said. "I wouldn't say this is a lot, but there was a time when we dreamt of a 100 dollar salary for lecturers."

Hovannisian said his university was tackling corruption by having students examined by more than one person or not by the person who was teaching them.

He argues that Armenia should move to the "credit system" used by most American universities where marks are accumulated in the course of the year through course work.

In 2005, Armenia joined the Bologna Process, which aims to regularise academic standards across Europe. It's hoped this will lead to the overhaul of the current Soviet-era system of marking.

Most believe that change needs to be implemented from above. Eighty-seven per cent of the polled students said that there should be a tightening of discipline in the management of higher education establishments. Some said that the minister of education should be sacked, others suggested exiling bribe-taking teachers to Siberia.

Amalia Kostandian, head of the Transparency International Armenian office, said that corruption in higher education was a systemic problem.

"Corruption will persist in the country, the system will remain unhealthy until a top-down revolution happens," said Kostandian.

The organiser of the survey, Sahak Manukian, head of Sargis Tkhruni, warns that in the meantime the culture of corruption is very deep-rooted.

"Nowadays those who pass their exams with a bribe are regarded with respect and envy, and not with pity," he said.

"Instead of being condemned these students are examples for others to follow."

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