



Merit matters: Student perceptions of faculty quality and reward[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 April 2015

Received in revised form 11 November 2015

Accepted 13 November 2015

Available online 2 January 2016

Keywords:

Development

Higher education

Quality of teaching

Corruption

Mobility

Favor reciprocation

ABSTRACT

This empirical research explores a role that the quality of teaching and students' competence play in shaping students' views about the upward mobility opportunities in their higher education institutions. It is often understood that the principal role of higher education is to promote merit-based mobility amongst students, as well as espouse the merit-based upward mobility amongst its faculty. How exactly students in higher education form their views about the presence of meritorious upward mobility is the question that remains largely unanswered, especially in developing societies. To help answer this question, the study relies on the binary logistic regression of data collected via 762 surveys from 6 public higher education institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and determines what factors help predict students' views on whether faculty promotions are merited or not. Findings in this article are sub-selected from a broader empirical work, and they point to a novel link: the quality of teaching and students' views on whether the most competent students are first to graduate in their faculties are the key predictors of whether students believe the faculty members within their higher education institutions are promoted based on merit. In the absence of meritocracy, students are, as this research finds, likely to categorize the educational system as corrupt. When the merit-based competition does not determine who moves up within higher education, one's belonging to the political, social, and economic elites tends to become the alternative basis for the upward mobility. Moving away from the merit-based mobility can have broad social consequences particularly in developing countries that are poorly equipped to react to such digressions, underlining the relevance of this work cross-nationally.

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1. Introduction

A key danger of educational corruption in developing societies rests in its systemic character and tendency to help hold the elites in power longer term. The merit-based social mobility – which is typically provided through higher education – malfunctions when the elites begin to engage and, gradually, normalize the corrupt behaviors within the educational system. I define corrupt behaviors in education as obtaining full or partial educational credentials and having access to ensuing benefits – to an individual or group, entity, class, or network – not only through bribes, but more importantly through favor reciprocations amongst the

members of the same group, class, or network. Corrupt behaviors do not only capture bribes resulting from the abuses of authority for monetary gain, but also favor exchanges and any other self-serving acts within the system in which an individual or group operates. Therefore, the corrupt behaviors presumably allow individuals benefiting from such favor reciprocations to move up in the society on a non-merit basis. For the purposes of this paper, I define favor reciprocations as mutually preferential treatments amongst the country's elites. Favor reciprocations in higher education may manifest in the form of professors, without merit, passing students who have political, familial, or social connections with the elites in expectation that such favors will be reciprocated in the future. In fact, I argue that this form of corruption, which does not include any bribes, is presently the most frequently occurring, yet uniquely destructive, form of educational corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As the most prominent form of non-pecuniary corruption in higher education (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2012), favor reciprocations most often help the members of the socio-economic and political elites or their protégés obtain academic credentials or passing grades. The elites tend to support and promote individuals based

[☆] This article was derived from a doctoral research, titled "Making of a Voiceless Youth: Corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Higher Education", which was defended in 2012 at Columbia University's Teachers College. This research was conducted with funding from the International Research and Exchange Board and Columbia University's Harriman Institute for Russian, Eurasian, and Eastern European Studies.

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on their belonging or connection to the elites rather than a merit-based competition. While academic credentials or faculty promotions that are awarded to the elites or their favorites are beneficial to the elites, these unmerited awards simultaneously limit merit-based opportunities for the non-elites. Consequently, higher education is the elites' pathway to legitimizing their power through sponsorship of their protégés. This non-pecuniary form of corruption in education is intangible and thereby difficult to detect. It not only minimizes meritocracy as the basis for the academic achievement but, more broadly, for one's social standing in a society.

The study does not quantify favor reciprocations given that they are the primary form of non-pecuniary corruption in higher education institutions, but it looks at how students' concern for the lack of merit within institutions of higher education shapes students' overall perceptions of the upward mobility opportunities available to their professors and peers. This empirical research explores a role that the quality of teaching¹ and students' competence play in shaping students' perceptions about the upward mobility opportunities in their higher education institutions. Herein, students' perceptions are defined as students' personal views on various concepts introduced to them during the survey process. Given the clandestine nature of corruption, having a better understanding on how students view corruption-related processes is presumed to be a reliable proxy for evaluating the actual corruption.

If there is no merit-based mobility both for students and their faculty, I assume the alternative is the elite's favoritism amongst the political, economic, academic, and social elites. Social mobility here refers to an individual's movement upward within institutional and social hierarchies. The basis upon which this upward movement occurs defines the type of social mobility, most often as either merit- or non-merit-based. In this work, the non-merit based upward mobility is presumed to take the form of sponsorship-based mobility (Turner, 1960), where upward movement is a function of the relationship with the existing elites and power holders.

Significant research (Heyneman, 2004; Temple and Petrov, 2004; Truex, 2010; Transparency International, 2013) explores various aspects of corruption in education. For instance, Heyneman's seminal piece from 2004 defines corruption in education, but also elaborates on interventions that can effectively lessen corruption. Temple and Petrov (2004) similarly theorize about the right approaches to fighting corruption; using cases of Russia and Azerbaijan, they rightly argue that only a comprehensive societal engagement can meaningfully lessen corruption. Exemplifying through the case of Russia, Denisova-Schmidt (2013) recognizes that educational corruption does not occur in isolation, so it is to be studied in a broader context of societal corruption. Truex (2010) interestingly looks at how education itself impacts one's attitudes towards corruption and finds that educating those in developing countries may lessen their proneness to corrupt behaviors. This study extends prior research on education and corruption by looking for formative impact the lack of merit has on how students view social mobility within their societies. Since research that links the upward mobility of faculty members, student perceptions of merit, and non-pecuniary corruption – herein interchangeably referred to as favors reciprocations – has not been sufficiently tackled within the education research, the study addresses this gap.

The study employs binary logistic regression to understand what factors shape youth's views on social mobility opportunities

available to their faculty members and their peers. Bosnia's higher education is a unique research venue for the study of social mobility because of the growing influence the post-war elites have had over higher education. I present only a segment of the quantitative analysis from a larger study that relies on a sample of 762 surveyed students from 6 public higher education institutions. This analysis specifically examines factors that help predict students' perceptions of merit-based upward mobility available to the faculty members at those institutions. Often, faculty members are presumed to be involved in bribes, but this research looks at factors that predict students' views on the upward mobility mechanisms available to faculty members within corrupt settings. In Bosnia, barriers to merit-based upward mobility in higher education for competent faculty members exist (Svevjesti, 2008, n. p.), but no substantive social science research has delved into the issue until this study.

Turner's (1960) pioneering work on sponsored and contest-based mobility principally guides the inquiry. Turner (1960) envisions a merit-based contest as one way to achieve mobility and elite status. He sees sponsorship by the power holders as an alternative pathway to obtaining the elite status. Recent protests against corruption in the government institutions in Bosnia suggest that the elites of developing countries often lack the will to substantively minimize and properly sanction corruption, including educational corruption, because it is the powerful elite circles that benefit from corruption in education and beyond. Turner's sponsored and contest-based mobility models are introduced into the analysis and contextually applied to help examine the relationship between social mobility and educational corruption present in Bosnia today. As Tomusk (2000, p. 240) interestingly states, "power is legitimizing itself through the educational systems", and, in Bosnia and Herzegovina's context, power is legitimizing itself through educational corruption. In such context, Turner's mobility models provide this research with a theoretical platform to ultimately understand a difference between the two modes of mobility, one based on merit and one based on ties to the existing elites.

The study's appeal rests in the applicability of the social mobility findings to countries that have similarly faced the challenge of pervasive societal corruption and favoritism amongst the elites. Recently, Sabic-El-Rayess (2014) has initiated work in this domain. She uniquely applies Albert Hirschman's theory of voice, exit, and loyalty to explain how and why youths in corrupt higher education systems react to corrupt behaviors. The author fundamentally redefines and introduces new forms of exit, voice, and loyalty that students practice in corrupt educational settings. Youths, as she evidences, uniquely react to corrupt higher education structures. New questions continue to emerge given the ongoing public outcries against corruption and lacking upward mobility opportunities for youths in Ukraine, Hungary, Mexico,² and other developing settings in recent years. The proclivity of developing countries towards growing instability and even violence as a reaction to corrupt practices of the national elites and lack of merit-based mobility for broader populations is a global policy concern. When the elites control education by controlling social mobility opportunities both for students and faculty members, they award individual success as they see fit rather than as merited. The study begins to address this problem by enabling the scholarly and policy communities to better understand the profound impact of non-pecuniary corruption in higher education.

¹ In this study, quality of teaching refers to perceptions measured as subjective opinions from students rather than objective measures collected by the institution.

² Please see the following article for an example of recent corruption-related protests: Tuckman, J. "Mexico on the brink: thousands protests over widespread corruption and student massacre." The Guardian. November 20th, 2014.

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