The Media on Corruption in Higher Education  
(An analysis of media coverage of the topic between June 5, 1999 and September 5, 2003)

The findings of the latest Corruption Monitoring, conducted by Vitosha Research and Coalition 2000 which surveys the general population and its attitudes towards corruption, have been already widely debated and are the focus of today's round table discussion. According to the survey, corruption pressure among university professors has gone up significantly. (http://www.vitosha-research.com/corind/july2003.pdf). In addition, 48 % of all respondents, i.e. nearly half of the population, draw their opinion from information in the mass media. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the way media have covered the topic of corruption in higher education for a sufficiently extensive period of time.

Methodology

*Period*: The analysis extends over the period June 5, 1999 - September 5, 2003 (4 years and 3 months in all)

*Media coverage*: National daily and weekly newspapers: Sega, Standard, Monitor, Pari, Novinar, Dnevnik, Democratsia, Trud, 24 Chasa, Capital, Banker, 168 Chasa, Cash, Chasa,  

*Selection method*: by key words: corruption (and the derivative words: corrupt, corruptedness, etc.), pay-off (and related words such as graft, etc.); bribe (and the derivatives: bribable, bribe-taking etc.);

*abuse* (and derivatives such as abuses etc.)

*Number of selected pieces during the period*: 1,018

*Scope of the analysis*: All pieces recounting particular cases of corruption. The articles that comment broadly on corruption in higher education as a phenomenon are not considered. Number of pieces containing particular information during the period: 221

The present analysis of the media coverage of corruption in higher education covers the following aspects:

1. **Particular cases of corruption:**
   - professors caught taking bribes upon signals deposited by students;
   - international commentary.

2. **Larger corruption patterns:**
   - marketing of manuals for certain university courses written by professors teaching those courses;
   - "trafficking" in students (e.g. the Medical University);
   - subjective/influenced grading of entrance examinations.

3. Allegations for malpractice against staff at institutes of higher education:
   - the Veliko Turnovo University "subsidiaries";
   - the sale of diplomas by Bourgas Free University;
   - violations related to the Erasmus Programme.

4. Anti-corruption measures in higher educations
5. Corruption in higher education in the context of ICT

In the analyzed period 5 particular cases of corruption in institutes of higher education were reported in the media. The case of Hristo Hristov, assistant professor at the faculty of chemistry at Shoumen University "Episkop Konstantin Preslavski" was most consistently and extensively reported. Hristov was caught in June 1999 while taking a bribe amounting $ 300 from a student he had previously failed at an exam. (29.6.1999 University Professor in Shoumen Arrested Taking a Bribe (MONITOR).

Three years later, the media announced the closure of the case and the perpetrator's sentencing to four years of imprisonment. The prosecution proved that the professor had habitually taken bribes from students varying from BGN 300 to $ 800. Most central media reported the news and some of the articles incorporated a detailed account of the case, starting from the circumstances accompanying the arrest, the allegations made and the sentence pronounced.

19.10.2002, 4 Years Imprisonment for a Corrupt University Professor (SEGA)
19.10.2002 Corrupt University Professor Sent to Prison for 4 Years (MONITOR)
19.10.2002 4 Years of Imprisonment for a Corrupt Teacher (24 CHASA)
19.10.2002 Professor to Stay in Prison 4 Years for Taking Bribes (TRUD)
19.10.2002 4 Years of Prison for a Corrupt Professor (NOVINAR)
19.10.2002 Assistant Professor Sentenced for Bribe Taking (DNEVNIK)

Another particular case of corruption reported by various media was the detention of associate professor Valentin Bonev, head of the International Economic Relation Department of Varna University of Economy. He was charged of taking a bribe from seven students totaling to BGL 210,000 (that is: BGL 30,000 from each student) at an international relations exam in June 1999. The central media published information both about the detention and the outcome of the lawsuit. A total of 24 students testified against the professor, describing the corruption pattern: he would fail students at the exams and then offer them to "straighten things out", i.e. to spare them a resit, which would cost them BGL 30,000. The professor pleaded guilty and was conditionally sentenced to 18 months of imprisonment. He was the first university professor ever to be incriminated for corruption.

16.6.1999 Head of University Department Arrested for Bribery (STANDARD)
16.6.1999 University Professor Detained While Taking Bribes (MONITOR)
09.3.2000 Corrupt Associate Professor Conditionally Sentenced (STANDARD)
08.3.2000 A Protected Witness Reported Against Bribe-Taking Varna Professor (MONITOR)
09.3.2000 Professor Sentenced for Corruption for the First Time Ever (PARI)

Another story was less scrupulously covered by the media: brief pieces informed about the verdict against a chief assistant professor at Varna Technical University named Boris Spasovich Dyakov. He was incriminated by a student for demanding a bribe in exchange of a high exam grade. The assistant professor was caught with the help of a marked 20-leva note in December 2002. Three months later, the court ruled him guilty and pronounced a 3-year conditional imprisonment paired with a 5-year trial period and a 3-year disentitlement from teaching or managerial positions.

The case was reported by a single newspaper: 20.3.2003 Assistant Professor Sentenced for Takina Money from Student (24
Chasa)

Charges brought by students are not always sufficient grounds for bringing action against professors. Such was the case in the town of Gabrovo. In 2001 the court refused to institute proceedings due to procedural oversights. The investigation, however, had proven earlier that two lady professors (whose names remain unknown), had practiced taking between... 100 and 200 for each exam students passed. The media coverage of the story was brief and unspecific.

11.10.2001 Corruption Case Referred Back to Prosecution (MONITOR)

In April 2003 the media reported on ongoing investigations into signals for corruption in the South-West University in Blagoevgrad. An inspection was initiated after a number of students had lodged signals that they had to buy off exams at the price of BGL 100. According to unofficial information, reports were filed against 9 well-known associate professors and professors from Sofia. The only related news was a brief item in Standard daily:

18.4.2003 Professors Charge 100 Leva Per Exam (STANDARD)

The media did not further examine how the investigation developed.

At the start of 2002, corruption in Bulgarian institutions of higher education became an internationally recognized problem with the official announcement of the Greek authorities that they will consider diplomas issued in Bulgaria invalid. This decision was provoked by numerous reports of Greek special services on corruption in Bulgarian medical universities. A special investigative article in Standard daily dwelt upon the topic featuring an additional concrete case to support it: In February 2002, three Greek students sat for their regular examination in morbid anatomy. Two of them were failed by associate professor Chavdar Georgiev and an assistant professor. According to the records of the examination, however, two more Greek students had turned up. These had not actually been present in the exam hall. Their grades were recorded by another teacher, professor Ivan Michailov, who had given D and C grades to all of them, including one of the female students failed by associate professor Chavdar Georgiev. According to the author of the article, the D grade during the winter exam period costs from $150 to $200, while its price in the summer exam period reaches $300. A resit costs $500. If a student chooses not to attend an exam, they could commission a fellow student to have their grade record filled by a D grade which would then cost up to $1000 or over in case of exams crucial for earning a degree. The article does not inform about the source of these figures; however, the reporter concludes that bribe rates at medical universities are higher than those at economic schools. The case was widely discussed and one of its effects was that the rector of the Medical University in Sofia announced the introduction of anticorruption measures. However, he did not elaborate on any particular steps to be taken.

19.3.2002 Anticorruption Measures To Be Launched at the Medical University in Sofia (DEMOCRATSIA)
16.3.2002 Foreign Students Run Away Because Bulgaria Is Not EU (STANDARD)
01.3.2002 Greece Holds Back Its Medical Students from Studying in Bulgaria (STANDARD)

Apart from particular cases of corruption, the media produced commentary on a
variety of indirect corruption patterns. The most widespread and frequently discussed of them was the practice of professors obliging students to buy course books written by them. Several particular cases were publicized by the media:

- students at the Varna University of Economics taking an exam in social security had to buy a manual at the back of which the exam tests were published. The professor prohibited the use of photocopies of the test - the precious test sheets had to be torn from the back of the book;
- another approach adopted by professors is to publish new versions of the assigned course book right before the exam. An associate professor of accounting at the University of National and World Economy permitted students to refer to his course book during the exam, not failing to ask questions from the parts of the book that had been insignificantly altered;
- attestation of completed semester is given only if a course book is presented. A professor of finance of the Tsenov Academy of Economics - Svishtov reportedly allowed a students to pass an exam on condition each student showed the book. He even signed each copy already shown to him to prevent multiple students presenting the same book.

None of the articles describing corruption mechanism, however, mentioned the name of any of the persons involved. Reporters obviously used the accounts of the concerned students as their only source.

04.10.2002 Professors Racketeer Students to Buy Their Textbooks (STANDARD)
19.4.2002 Textbooks at University Are "Recommended" By the Kilo (SEGA)

Certain "legal" corruption patterns were also disclosed in the media. Less than a few weeks ago, 168 Chasa published an article entitled "The Trafficking in Students". The item described a practice through which students who have failed at entrance exams in Bulgaria manage to enroll in universities abroad. The Medical University is again a primary example. The author depicts the steps of this legal pattern. Prospective students failing the entrance exams enroll in medical universities in neighboring states such as the Ukraine, Moldova, Macedonia or Romania via private education brokers. Being foreigners, they do not need to pass entrance exams, but only to pay an annual fee varying from € 1000 to € 2500 for the different majors. The next year, these same students address the rector of the Medical University with a request to be transferred to Bulgaria which is usually satisfied. The investigation points out that the practice of "paying is studying" has been going on uninterrupted. A case in point is an association by the name of Stomart 21 established at the Faculty of Stomatology. Last year a number of Bulgaria students transferred from foreign universities donated BGN 7,500 each by a sponsorship contract signed with the association, while the amount in this year's contract was BGN 6,500. The sources the author refers to are the official information on the number of students coming in from abroad, the Medical University's financial reports and testimonials from students who have had first-hand experience of the scheme.

05.9.2003 Trafficking in Students (168 Chasa)

The most widely debated case of "authorized corruption" in recent years was that of the Veliko Turnovo University "subsidiaries". Certain documents submitted in the Parliamentary Committee for Combating Corruption in late January made it clear that this was an abuse of office on the part of the rector and his cronies which had brought them huge gains. This information was first published on the Anticorruption.bg web site on March 15, 2003. Two days later our team received a formal reply by the university management. signed by
Associate Professor Dr. Stoyan Bourov, the deputy rector. The letter contended that the data we had published was false and defined them as an attempt to demoralize the management on the eve of the elections for a new rector, a new academic council and a chairman of the general assembly. In reply, our team sent 10 questions to the rector, none of which was ever answered.

http://www.anticorruption.bg/bg/dalavera_vt/razvruzka.htm (Only in Bulgarian)

In reality, the pattern is as follows: the University of Veliko Turnovo opened subsidiary training centers in Sofia, Plovdiv and Rousse. Meanwhile, they used broker companies to recruit students from Hasskovo, Kardzhali, Stara Zagora and Kazanlak. According to official information, each subsidiary has around 13,000 students enrolled, each of whom pays a 400-leva annual fee. Most students, however, do not transfer the fees to university accounts, but to certain private companies and associations which have concluded contracts with the rector. These contracts testify that private entities earn between 70 and 80% of the income from fees, while the share of direct earnings for the university does not exceed 20-30%.

At the start of April, the case was already publicized by the national media. Detailed items appeared on all national daily newspapers within a month. Many reporters made their own investigations, which, combined with earlier publications, helped outline the overall corruption pattern. The final decision of the Ministry of Education was issued in July, following a complete investigation into the case. It ruled that the subsidiary training centers established on the grounds of contracts between the University of Veliko Turnovo and various private companies should either be closed down or formally accredited, while their students (whose number during the 2002-2003 academic year was no less than 4,424) should complete their education at the parent University of Veliko Turnovo.

02.1.2003 How Does the Fraud Work? (SEGA)
02.1.2003 The State Is Another Accomplice in the Fraud with University Subsidiaries (SEGA)
04.4.2003 Rector Runs a Bare-Faced Robbery (NOVINAR)
08.4.2003 Veliko Turnovo University's Own Business (SEGA)
14.4.2003 Veliko Turnovo University Has Degraded Higher Education (МОНИТОР)
03.5.2003 A Scandal in Veliko Turnovo Before the New Head Elections (24 Chasa)
07.5.2003 University Rector Responsible for Illegal Subsidiaries Runs for a Second Term of Office (SEGA)
13.5.2003 5,000 Students To Be Transferred From Veliko Turnovo University Subsidiaries? (в.CEGA)
28.6.2003 Ministry of Education Confirms: The University of Veliko Turnovo Offers Illegal Education to Thousands of Students (SEGA)
08.7.2003 The University of Veliko Turnovo Must Close Down Its Illegal Training Centers (SEGA)
09.7.2003 The University of Veliko Turnovo Must Close Down or Get Accredited Its Six Training Centers (24 Chasa)

At the start of August, MPs from the Simeon II National Movement, the United Democratic Forces, Coalition for Bulgaria and the NIE parliamentary group approached the Supreme Prosecution Office of Cassation on the illegal activities of Veliko Turnovo University's subsidiary training centers. On the next day the Prosecution Office ordered a full tax and financial audit of the so called
subsidiary centers. On August 4 the university ceased admitting students to all its subsidiaries.

31.7.2003 Filchev Summons Rector On Account Of Illegal Subsidiaries (SEGA)
31.7.2003 Deputy Minister and Rector Summoned by the Prosecution Office (MONITOR)
31.7.2003 Turnovo University Subsidiaries Are a Violation of the Law (TRUD)
31.7.2003 The Case of Turnovo University Referred to the Prosecution Office (NOVINAR)
31.7.2003 The Prosecution Annoyed by University Subsidiaries (DNEVNIK)

This has been the case most widely reported in relation to corruption in higher education. The media followed closely its development, publishing 35 items between April and August. Radio and TV stations and online newspaper editions also gave a fair coverage of the case.

The illegal diplomas issued by the Bourgas University Prof. Assen Zlatarev made another scandal that gained extensive commentary in 2002. A public committee demanded the removal of associate professor Ralev from the rector's office. He was implicated in issuing fictitious diplomas to Deputy Defense Minister Mehmred Dzhafer, to the Chair of the Social Parliamentary Committee Hassan Ademov and to former Health Minister Ilko Semerdzhiev. Two years later, a group of 50 students and professors accused the rector of one-man rule, demanding bribes, embezzlement of students' funds, illegally distributing flats in student dormitories, politically motivated staff dismissals and ceding business grounds to crony companies. The case, however, has not reached any solution so far and none of the central media have published any related reports.

04.2.2002 Adventure and Plotting at Bourgas University (SEGA)
25.10.2000 Student Sues the Rector of Bourgas University (MONITOR)
04.12.2002 Removal of Rector Demanded Because Of False Diplomas (SEGA)

The EU Erasmus Program designed for higher education has drastically decreased its quotas for Bulgaria as well as the monthly study grant amounts for Bulgarian students and teaching staff at foreign universities. The European Commission has imposed these sanctions on the grounds of a number of frauds and recorded violations of the program rules. Among these are poor transparency and objectivity of criteria and a lack of regulated student and teaching staff selection procedure. Students in higher education may spend a study period from 3 to 12 months in one of the 30 participating countries, while teachers are granted between one and eight weeks at a partner university. In many cases however, teachers are allowed to apply for student-training courses, and are turned down by the Commission since the majority of them have previously participated in the program more than once. The European Commission has also noted that the same teaching staff and their protege students are sent abroad under the program. The regular students meant to be its main beneficiaries are poorly informed of their right to take part.

The Erasmus case could have become the talk of the day, yet media attention promptly subsided and none of the institutions responsible for the implementation of EU educational programs in Bulgaria took any relevant action.

16.12.2002 European Commission Cuts the Bulgarian Quota for the Erasmus Program (DNEVNIK)
During the reported period there was a single occasion of a professor testifying to the presence of corruption in the university where he teaches. In year 2000, associate professor Stoyan Alexandrov defined the University of National and World Economy as a "classical pyramid", home of "a perfectly functioning bribe-collection system". He even disclosed the fact that former MP Tsvetelin Kanchev had sent his exam record book furnished with 500 dollars and received a D grade without attending the exam at all. As a result, the university management threatened to sue Mr. Alexandrov, but no actual action was taken and before long the case was shelved.

15.2.2000 University To Sue Stoyan Alexandrov (STANDARD)
14.2.2000 Stoyan Alexandrov: the UNWE Is a Classical Pyramid (SEGA)
14.2.2000 The UNWE Is a Pyramid, Claims Stoyan Alexandrov (MONITOR)

Two years later, UNWE rector Professor Kamen Mirkovich accused the student community of corrupting teaching stuff and choosing to pay instead of studying. This was an indirect recognition of the presence of corruption in higher education.

02.10.2002 Grades Are Paid, But Where Does the Money Go? (NOVINAR)
01.10.2002 Rector Accuses Students of Corrupting Teachers! (SEGA)

The analysis of articles published during the reported period points to several clearly defined corruption patterns in higher education. These have been described every so often in the media but have not provoked any significant reforms. Another group of items have addressed the measures for combating corruption in higher education. The UNWE's anti-corruption strategy has been reported in greatest detail among them. As early as in 2001 the university adopted a student assessment system by which students evaluate the teaching staff at the end of each semester. All grades given by professors are once again confirmed by an independent commission made up of teaching staff who have not participated in the grading.

05.12.2001 Students Criticize Corrupt Professors (TRUD)
07.12.2001 UNWE Adopts an Anticorruption Program (SEGA)

In 2002, the Assembly of Students' Councils announced the drafting of a Charter of Honor which would prohibit students to bribe their tutors. The Charter is already effective after being debated with the managerial staff of most universities. Its application and the expected outcomes were extensively reported, yet, instead of choosing an anti-corruption perspective the media focused on ethical proscriptions against exam cheating. Thus, only one article matches the purpose of the present case study.

04.10.2002 Student Charter Prohibits Pay-Offs (STANDARD)

Year 2003 may be described as the year of anti-corruption initiatives in higher education. Even at the start of the year, at a forum on higher education in economics, the deputy prime minister Nikolay Vassilev stated that the level of corruption in universities is excessively high. He proposed that surveillance cameras should be installed at exam halls to prevent professors from taking bribes.

03.12.2002 Surveillance Cameras To Follow Professors During Exams (NOVINAR)
In January the same year a project on the establishment of a John Atanassov virtual center was launched, whose aim is to introduce computer-based exams in several Bulgarian universities. The first exam of this type will be held during the summer exam period at the Trakia University in Stara Zagora. This is expected to curtail corruption since "computers cannot take pay-offs".

03.12.2002 Surveillance Cameras To Follow Professors During Exams (NOVINAR)

Also in January, the rector of the University of Plovdiv Paisii Hilendarski and Coalition for Bulgaria MP Professor Ognyan Saparev, proposed that university professors incriminated for being paid to write a student's thesis should be deprived of their scientific degree.

23.1.2003 Corrupt Professors to Be Deprived of Degrees (STANDARD)

Nevertheless, the public remains in the dark as to what extent all these proposals are being applied and what outcomes they are producing since the media fail to publish any relevant information.

Conclusions

From all of the above information it becomes clear that corruption in Bulgarian higher education is a topic that does not gain sufficient media coverage. There was a slight upsurge in 2003 when the number of articles grew substantially as against previous years. Nevertheless, the issue is continually treated as a general phenomenon and many of the analyses, commentaries and interviews fail to provide particular examples or data. As to the findings of Vitosha Research in their monitoring of public opinion on corruption in higher education, it is formed on the basis of broad charges and generalizations rather than on concrete analyses. The few widely circulated cases of corrupt university professors who were later sentenced for their offences served only to reinforce the general opinion that there is corruption in higher education. To a degree, this enhances the myth that corruption in universities is widespread derived from so many articles simplifying the issue. The items featuring particular examples of corruption, on the other hand, are as few as 20% of the total number.

Public attitude may be additionally influenced by word of mouth information from friends and acquaintances considering that, according to official data taken from the Ministry of Education web site, there are 48 institutions of higher education in Bulgaria at present - 40 universities and 8 colleges. The total number of students in academic year 2002-2003 is 230,513. Nevertheless, only 23.3% respondents have stated that they are influenced by such information, yet the sources used by reporters are mainly testimonials of students who have heard about, witnessed, or become victims of corruption.

Corruption in higher education in the context of ICT

The debate on corruption in higher education has extended to internet forums. For one thing, an increasing number of students have started communicating through the internet. Yet, virtual communication offers comfortable anonymity for the timid and the backbiters alike. Since July 2002, the Anticorruption.bg web site enables users to submit signals for corruption. So far, such signals have been lodged from the Varna University of Economics - for sexual harassment: from the University of National and World
Economy - for illegal charging of fees to issue free-of-charge documents; from the Varna University of Economics and the Technical University, whose author described particular examples of corruption and named the concrete professors involved.

All of the signals were anonymous. This topic is also discussed in the forums of the largest Bulgarian portal sites:

Dir.bg (http://clubs.dir.bg/postlist.php?Cat=167&Board=studenti)
GBG.bg (http://forum.abv.bg/cgi-bin/forum.pl?action=list&Board=unss; http://forum.abv.bg/cgi-bin/forum.pl?action=list&Board=student)

In addition, there are related forums in the online editions of most newspapers.

02.10.2002 Written Exams Can Curb Corruption! (SEGA)