

**STUDENTS AS INITIATORS OF BRIBES:
'STATUS' BASED SOCIAL CONTEXT AS THE CAUSE OF CORRUPTION IN THE
AZERBAIJANI HIGHER EDUCATION**

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BAKU - 2011

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INTRODUCTION

To what extent corruption is caused by an ordinary citizen's 'offer' rather than a public officer's 'demand'? In a strange twist of prejudice, the extortion of bribes practiced by civil servants ('demand') almost totally eclipses in social researches equally important facet of corruption – *offer* of bribes by ordinary citizens. The majority of academic studies and corruption indices (of Transparency International, World Bank) assess only the misbehavior of public office holders. According to Transparency International's Director of Policy and Research, Dr. Robin Hodess "in all cases [of corruption], small and large, what matters most is that people feel that the system has let them down. That government in many cases has taken and abused power" (ISN Security Watch 2011). An implicit argument is that ordinary citizens cannot cause corruption. As a result, it is assumed that the key to a successful fight with corruption lies in the changes within the public institutions.

However, even ideal laws and governmental policies do not guarantee order, because the order depends ultimately on the willingness of ordinary citizens to embrace good practices and integrate them into their daily behavior. To put it straightforward, even if a public officer respects the letter of the law, there is always a risk that the breach of law will emanate from the opposite direction – an officer will be offered a bribe by ordinary citizens. This paper seeks to fill this research gap and contribute to the academic debates about the causes of corruption.

The focus of this paper is higher education corruption in a post-Soviet country Azerbaijan. Despite passing the Law on Combating Corruption (2004), and setting out a high profile Commission on Combating Corruption (2004), as well as other notable steps, the progress in fight with corruption is still out of reach. According to a range of reports and surveys (Transparency International, World Bank) Azerbaijan, fares bad in terms of corruption. On a Transparency International (TI) global corruption perception index in 2010 Azerbaijan ranked 134th out of 178 countries.

However, the exposure to corruption is not uniform along various social spheres. Country Corruption Assessment (2004), administered in Azerbaijan by TI, insists that it is almost impossible to avoid bribe extortion in obtaining “social benefits, police protection, reduced or adapted military service, a court hearing, employment in the public sector, a land plot or the legalization of its purchase” (TI 2004, 7), while education services, along with religious ones, were pointed at as two spheres in which “it is possible to resist extortion to some degree and still obtain” these services. However, according to the Center for Innovations in Education (CIE) estimates, a substantial proportion (74.6%) of the Azerbaijani university students are paying bribes (CIE 2008). In this case, it is very puzzling why students still pay bribes if they, according to the TI study, can with a high degree of success obtain educational services without paying bribes?

The study of bribe patterns in the higher education of Azerbaijan shows that the market for bribes in the universities of the country is driven more by the supply side than the demand of them. Specifically, the survey, conducted within the frames of the research shows that students of the Azerbaijani universities on average offer bribes more often than their educators demand bribes from them. According to the survey data, the preponderance of bribe offers is caused by the peculiarities of the Azerbaijani social climate. This climate, defined by an implicit consensus between government and population, posits merit as a far less important factor of education, subsequent employment and promotion than a person’s ‘status’, a mere social label.

A status-driven social milieu is reflected in the willingness of students to pay bribes to acquire only a university diploma – an embodiment of a graduate ‘status’. The desire to purchase a university diploma is an immediate cause that feeds bribe offer rates, exceeding that of a bribe demand. In its turn, a desire to pay money for a diploma is caused by three factors. First, by putting a diploma (rather than skills) as a central requirement for public employment, the government (as the largest employer in Azerbaijan) creates a ‘diploma rush’ among the students. Second, the ineffectiveness of the Azerbaijani higher education in providing marketable skills leads students to offer bribes to get through the courses – studying these courses is viewed by the majority of respondents as “a waste of time”. Third, a low level of respect to officially sanctioned norms among the Azerbaijani students paves the way to bribe offers even in the absence

of a bribe demand. As a result, a delicate consensus unites the public and government in contributing in equal measures to making a social ‘status’, embodied in diploma (not merit, and skills/knowledge associated with it) the corner-stone of social organization, while ineffective educational system seals this social consensus. The end-result is a milieu that invites bribe offers.

This finding goes beyond a bureaucratic graft model, so widely supported by policy-making and theorizing of corruption. A recent anti-corruption campaign in Azerbaijan, which has witnessed layoffs of several high profile bureaucrats, is yet another example of looking at the fight with bribes through bureaucratic graft lenses. In a society, in which there is an implicit consensus between government and population to offer and pay for ‘status’ rather than merit, bribing is not solely defined by ineffective governmental policies. It is not confined to public administration, but rather is a function of a broader social climate. Therefore, a broader, social climate of corruption and the incidence of bribe offers, closely related to this climate, should be paid proper attention in fighting corruption – the sphere currently dominated by bribe demand discourse both in academia and public policy.

An important finding of the research, highlighting a new aspect of corruption, is a strong inverse correlation between an individual’s respect to official rules and the frequency with which he/she offers bribes. Two pieces of evidence establish this correlation. Firstly, the research found that the higher a respondent’s abidance by traffic rules, the lower is the incidence with which he/she offers bribes to public officials. Secondly, the share of the respondents rejecting ‘integrity’ and ‘legal reprisals’ (76.1%), when pondering whether to offer a bribe or not, overlaps with actual rates of bribing practice (around 70%) among the respondents. This finding indicates that bribing is closely tied to an individual’s respect of the rule of law and the broader legality in a society. ***Further researches, studying in-depth the correlation between bribe offer rates and the abidance of citizens to broader set of legally sanctioned rules and regulations, is a productive avenue for the development of our knowledge about corruption.*** These findings emphasize the importance of studying the level of ordinary citizens’ readiness to embrace corruption.

The discussion starts with theoretical framing of corruption. Before turning to empirical findings, I will lay out the nature and procedures of the survey, discussing methodology and sampling. The empirical discussion starts with the identification of actual rates of bribing in the Azerbaijani universities. The survey data identifies the rate of corruption as an aggregate of several overlapping indicators. My aim is to set specific benchmarks against which increase or decrease of bribing in the future are easy to quantify. Specifically, these benchmarks might give rigor to the assessment of government initiatives in combating corruption. The fourth section measures and compares the rates of bribe offer as opposed to that of bribe demand in the Azerbaijani universities. The aim of the section is to identify the direction of bribing: whether and to what extent it is students who are responsible for the initiation of bribes. The fifth section identifies the causes of bribe offer, initiated by students. The final section focuses on social stratification mechanisms and identifies the employment related problems, directly affecting the bribe offer choice of the Azerbaijani students. The conclusion discusses in-depth specific policy recommendations for a more nuanced fight with corruption in the Azerbaijani higher education.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION OF CORRUPTION

There is a long-standing academic debate about the causes of corruption, defined in this study as the use by an officer of his/her public office for a preferential treatment of an individual/group in exchange for a personal gain. As Daniel Treisman argues, “different theories associate cross-national variation in the extent of corruption with particular historical and cultural traditions, levels of economic development, political institutions, and government policies” (Treisman 1998, 1). According to the ‘culturalist’ perspective, the causes of the corruption should be attributed to long-standing patterns of interaction, elevated to a status of tradition within a given society (Kohli 1975, 32).

Belonging to this category is Robert Merton's means-ends schema (Harrison, Huntington 2000). The second current finds the causes of corruption in the shape of political institutions (Shleifer and Vishny 1993). To this strand also belong researchers, attributing corruption to the level of economic development (Huntington 1968). And, finally the third current of academic thought on the causes of corruption states that "whatever the nature of political institutions, it is the policies actually adopted by those in power that determine the extent of corruption" (Treisman 1998, 8).

The researches dedicated to the problem of the educational corruption in Azerbaijan, and the post-Soviet region in general, usually support one of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks. Thus, as supporters of the culturalist approach, Temple and Petrov (2004) see the cause of corruption in Azerbaijani and Russian higher education in the absence of social capital, while Vartuhi Tonoyan identifies its causes in patterns of trust, strongly shaped by shared society-wide values (Tonoyan 2004). On the other hand, Hamlet Isaxanli, a proponent of institutionalist current, sees the main cause of corruption in the peculiarities of the system on which higher education in Azerbaijan is based on (Isaxanli 2005). And finally, there are those who argue that the corruption in higher education is actually part of broader policies of the government. This approach ties corruption in higher education not to poor institutions, or low salaries, but to the willingness of the ruling elite to keep universities under political control, while letting them "feed from the service" (Osipian 2007) – the application of Susan Rose-Ackerman's (1978) allocation model, in which bureaucrats use their gate-keeping functions to benefit from the distribution of scarce resources, to the study of higher education.

Noting a rudimentary state of the discussion about the causes of corruption, the current research tries not only to contribute to the afore-mentioned academic debate by highlighting the causes behind a bribe offer of students within the Azerbaijani universities. It will also probe avenues for, previously neglected, alternative explanations. One such avenue is the identification of the level of willingness of a student to address the problem of corruption. This willingness is an important factor in assessing the level of support that the new anti-corruption measures might have among the student population.

In general, depending on the results of the fieldwork, the research tries to find out whether the effectiveness of government's corruption fight demands concentration on

public employment policy (because it requires Diploma of a certain institution from a recent graduate to let him/her get desired employment). Or on the other hand, the fight with corruption demands also active governmental work in dissuading negative clichés of “group think”, if corruption in higher educational institutions depends on the appreciation of values directly or indirectly leading to bribe offers (culturalist view of corruption). Alternatively, if the cause of corruption is the lack of choice on the part of the students, as they are usually hard pressed for bribes, what might be the ways to free students from the pressure of corrupt officials and educators at the universities (policy and/or developmentalist vision of corruption)? In short, the research findings will support some of the three debating theories vis-à-vis the remaining ones, and advocate for respective public policy courses.

METHODOLOGY

This publication draws on the findings of the survey of 200 current students and 60 recent graduates held in Azerbaijan in 2010 – 2011, as well as 8 in-depth interviews with the graduates having at least five years of employment track record in the Azerbaijani job market. The research mainly focuses on bribes, as “the most widespread form of corruption” (Temple, Petrov 2004, 89). Specifically, the fieldwork was shaped to identify relative weights of bribe demand and offer, as well as specific quantitative measures of bribing practice and the causes of bribe offers in the Azerbaijani universities. The main function of in-depth interviewing was to identify the exact factors affecting a graduate’s post-education employment, as well as the hierarchy of these factors in both getting a job and career progress.

The main obstacle of the research was to make students speak their mind. In a society with rampant corruption in practice, but strong disapproval in rhetoric, it is difficult to obtain sincere position of the respondents, while their confession of bribing may lead to group pressure or even legal charges. For this reason, the research employed personal interviewing instead of focus group discussions, to free respondents from possible group pressure.

Also, head-on questions on corruption and its attractiveness to respondents could similarly cause alert and insincere or automatic responses, due to a strong formal disapproval of bribing in the Azerbaijani society. Under these circumstances, it is much more advisable to arrive at the discussion of corruption gradually, and where possible indirectly. Therefore, the survey questions have been fashioned in a way to invite answers of respondents. This was achieved through the employment of open-ended and semi-open questions in the questionnaire, enabling the respondent to convey uncomfortable ideas/experiences in a personally acceptable form.

SAMPLING

In order to obtain a representative sample of respondents, the research sampling reflected the relative share of students by gender, language, specialty group, year, type (private / public) of education. The sampling was framed according to official data of the State Students Admission Commission (SSAC) of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The academic year 2007-2008 university admissions data has been taken as a reflective of current students, representing roughly the same specialty breakdown as previous and subsequent years of admission. The academic year 2004-2005 admissions data is taken as a representative of the recent graduates, reflecting roughly the same specialty breakdown as previous and subsequent years of admission till 2007-2008, which saw the transition from 5-specialty group division to 4-specialty group division admissions. Also, the academic year 2004-2005 is the oldest year that SSAC has statistical data for.

According to the SSAC, the number of students admitted to universities for the academic year 2007-2008 amounted to 25811 persons. The relative share of admission by the specialty groups and language of education is given in the following tables (See Tables 1.1 – 1.7).

Table 1.1. Share of students admitted to the Azerbaijani universities for the academic year 2007-2008 (in percentage)

Specialty Group	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Total for Both types of Languages
I	25	4	30

II	21	4	25
III	28	5	33
IV	11	2	12
Total	85	15	100

Table 1.2. Share of students admitted to the Azerbaijani universities for the academic year 2004-2005 (in percentage)

Specialty Group	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Total for Both types of Languages
I	22	4	26
II	19	4	23
III	24	4	28
IV	12	2	14
V	8	0	8
Total	86	14	100

Due to the unavailability of student lists, which could be used to select students randomly for the survey, the questionnaires have been administered at the entrance to randomly selected private and public universities. The sampling units were selected through the application of stepwise method: every fourth student leaving the university gates has been approached by the interviewers. While higher education institutions in Azerbaijan are located mainly in Baku, Ganja and Lenkoran, the survey was conducted in these cities. The interviews of recent graduates were administered in public locations (namely, parks, squares) not associated with any background, income level, professional experience, social, political or any other inclinations.

The selection of respondent graduates also followed a step method (every fourth interviewee, satisfying filter questions, was selected to be interviewed for the survey). In interviewing both students and graduates, quotas (gender, language, specialty group, etc.) have been followed. Non-response rate for this survey was 14% for students and graduates combined. The gender breakdown of the interviewed respondents has been the following: 49.2% female and 50.8% male.

Table 1.3. The breakdown of student respondents from public universities in the 1st – 4th year of their Bachelor’s studies, who have participated in the survey (in the number of students)

Specialty Group	1 st year of Bachelor’s studies		2 nd year of Bachelor’s studies		3 rd year of Bachelor’s studies		4 th year of Bachelor’s studies	
	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education
I	12	1	11	6	9	0	8	1
II	6	1	16	4	9	1	7	3
III	5	0	10	4	9	1	8	4
IV	3	0	6	1	4	1	4	1
Total	26	2	43	15	31	3	27	9

Table 1.4. The breakdown of student respondents from public universities in the 5th / 6th year of their Bachelor’s studies or 1st / 2nd year of their Master’s studies, who have participated in the survey (in the number of students)

5 th year of Bachelor’s studies		6 th year of Bachelor’s studies		1 st year of Master’s studies		2 nd year of Master’s studies	
Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	5	2	0	0
0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	5	0	5	2	0	0

Table 1.5. The breakdown of student respondents from private universities, who have participated in the survey (in the number of students)

	1 st year of Bachelor’s studies	2 nd year of Bachelor’s studies	3 rd year of Bachelor’s studies	4 th year of Bachelor’s studies	1 st year of Master’s studies	2 nd year of Master’s studies
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Specialty Group	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education
I	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
II	0	0	4	0	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
III	4	0	5	0	6	1	4	0	0	0	0	0
IV	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Total	4	0	9	0	12	1	6	0	0	1	0	0

Table 1.6. The breakdown of graduate respondents from public universities, who have participated in the survey (in the number of graduates)

Year of graduation	2007		2008		2009		2010	
Specialty Group	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education
I	4	1	2	1	3	0	2	0
II	1	0	2	2	4	1	1	1
III	7	0	3	1	3	0	2	0
IV	2	0	1	1	0	0	2	0
V	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0
Total	15	1	8	5	12	2	7	1

Table 1.7. The breakdown of graduate respondents from private universities, who have participated in the survey (in the number of graduates)

Year of graduation	2007		2008		2009		2010	
Specialty Group	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education	Azerbaijan Language Education	Russian Language Education
I	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
II	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
III	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
IV	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Total	2	0	1	1	2	0	2	1

THE DEGREE OF BRIBING IN THE AZERBAIJANI HIGHER EDUCATION

Naturally, the first issue to consider in this study is whether there is a bribing in the Azerbaijani universities. And if there is one, what is its degree? The survey results show that between 61% and 70% of the respondents have been involved in bribing. This range is an aggregate of five overlapping figures. The first factor is an actual practice of bribing. Thus, 67.3% of the respondents¹ (current students and recent graduates combined) indicated that they have paid a bribe to their university administrators /professors. The second factor is the frequency of witnessing bribe demands from university staff by students. Only 30.0% of the respondents have never witnessed any bribe demand from their educators, while the rest 70.0% experienced direct or indirect bribe extortion. The third factor is the willingness of the respondents to offer a bribe. 62% of current students have reported that they are ready to offer bribes. The number of students empathizing with bribe offer of others (70.0%) and the rate of student bribe offer under the condition of a real choice to avoid bribes (61.0%) are the fourth and the fifth factors respectively.

Thus, the share of empathizers, potential and actual bribers, is very close to each other, putting bribe involvement level of students between 61.0% and 70.0% – a level close to 74.6% identified by a similar CIE study (2008) among the Azerbaijani students. These five indicators can be taken as benchmarks to measure the success of anti-corruption measures. These figures indicate that roughly three fourth of the students in Azerbaijan are engaged in bribing. In comparison, according to Heyneman et al, “on average, between 18 and 20 percent of the students in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Serbia and 40 percent of the students in Moldova reported that they had used some illegal method to gain admission to their university” (Heyneman, Anderson, Nuraliyeva 2008, 4).

Moreover, there are other important indicators showing the seriousness of corruption in the Azerbaijani universities. For the majority (51.5%) of students and recent

¹ Here and elsewhere “the respondents” stands for the combined result of the survey of current students and recent graduates. In cases that refer exclusively to the results of the survey of students or graduates alone, the respondent category will be explicitly named.

graduates corruption is the most important problem of the Azerbaijani educational system (see Table 2). 68.0% of the current students became socialized to bribes since secondary school years, while 26.5% of them faced a bribe for the first time in their university years.

Table 2. The most important problem of the Azerbaijani educational system for the respondents

What do you think is the most important problem of the Azerbaijani educational system?		
	Frequency	Percent
Low salaries of professors/administrators	3	1.2
Low quality of curricula / skills taught	36	13.8
Corruption	134	51.5
Low quality of relations among people at educational institutions	6	2.3
Low quality of services (poor libraries, labs, etc.)	9	3.5
Interference of parents into university choice of their children	3	1.2
The lack interest in knowledge acquisition among the students	30	11.5
There is NO system in the education in Azerbaijan	32	12.3
No job placement services at the Azerbaijani universities	1	0.4
Domination of theory to the detriment of the practice workshops	4	1.5
The lack of educators in vital academic spheres	2	0.8
Total	260	100

Simultaneously, the survey data shows that students and educators face bribing on a routine basis in the Azerbaijani universities. Only 30% of the respondents reported that their university instructors refrain from demanding bribes from them, while 81.5% of students are in varying degrees engaged in bribe offering. Notably, more than third (35.8%) of the respondents have faced bribe demands from professors and administrators on a regular basis (from 10 times and more). The student offer of bribes on a regular basis is even higher: almost half of respondents (47.3%) pointed out that they have witnessed their peers to offer bribes to educators on a regular basis (from 10 times and more).

The level of bribing (both demand and offer) in the Azerbaijani universities is substantial. The survey results support TI report (2004) conclusions that it is relatively easier to avoid bribes in the educational sphere. Specifically, 94.5% of the respondents of our survey indicated that they have a real choice not to give bribes to a professor/administrator at their respective universities. To the backdrop of this relatively

relaxed environment, the incidence of bribing (both demand and offer) seems very high. The analysis of the causes of this development might yield valuable insights into the nature of mechanisms to be employed in fighting higher education corruption in Azerbaijan. However, before discussing the causes of bribing, let's first identify the direction of it in the Azerbaijani higher education: whether it runs from students to educators or vice versa?

THE DIRECTION OF BRIBING IN THE AZERBAIJANI UNIVERSITIES

The survey result show that although bribing runs both 'upstream' and 'downstream' (i.e., both demand and offer of bribes are practiced widely), the rates of bribe offer is greater than that of bribe demand. Specifically, students on average refrain from initiating bribes less than professors/ administrators do, while engaging in regular bribing (from 10 times and more) substantially more often than educators. Simultaneously, the students demonstrate very mild, understanding attitude toward the bribing of educators – a position that creates a propitious ground for corruption.

The offer of bribes in the Azerbaijani universities generally exceeds bribe demand. On average only 18.5% of the respondents altogether refrain from offering bribes, while the share of educators refusing to demand bribe is 30.0%. At the same time, an interesting point is that the share of students and recent graduates engaged in bribe offer on a regular basis (47.3%) is substantially greater than the percentage of educators, demanding bribes regularly (35.8%) (see Table 3). It shows that corrupt educators still have a margin to meet the expectations of students, who are ready to offer bribes. Thus, generally, while bribing runs both ways, the offer of it embraces greater number of students than does its demand. To put these figures into a comparative perspective, the director of the All-Russian Education Foundation, Sergey Komkov argues that the share of Russian students, engaged in bribe offering is 50-60%, while 30-40% of university instructors demand bribe regularly (Kolesnichenko, Lonskaya 2009).

Table 3. The rates of bribe offer and demand experienced by the respondents (in %)

How often have you witnessed a professor (your fellow students) demanding (offering) a bribe for preferential treatment or consideration?		
Rate of bribing	Bribe offer by students	Bribe demand from professors
Never	18.5	30.0
Randomly (from once to 5 times)	21.9	27.3
Occasionally (from 6 to 10 times)	12.3	6.9
Regularly (more than 10 times)	47.3	35.8
Total	100.0	100.0

Students are widely sympathetic of bribes. Although the measures of student support of bribes cannot serve as a good indicator of the direction of bribing, nevertheless it can provide important information to understand the willingness of students to address the problem of corruption. The student support of bribes is an aggregate of the actual bribing practice and potential (readiness) to bribe among those who have a choice to avoid bribes, as well as the share of those empathizing with bribe offerers. An additional factor is a student readiness to bribe even when perceiving bribes as a negative influence on one's education. The survey measures along these lines show a student support of corruption as embracing from 41.5% to 70.0% of the respondents.

An 'understanding' attitude of students towards bribing is explicit in a range of other indicators, revealed by the survey. Despite having a chance to avoid bribes, students nevertheless both indulge corrupt behavior of educators and offer bribes. Out of 200 current students surveyed, 61.0% indicated having a choice to avoid bribes, but nevertheless having an experience of offering a bribe (see Table 4). The rate of graduates willing to offer a bribe, while having a choice to avoid them is very close (58.5%).

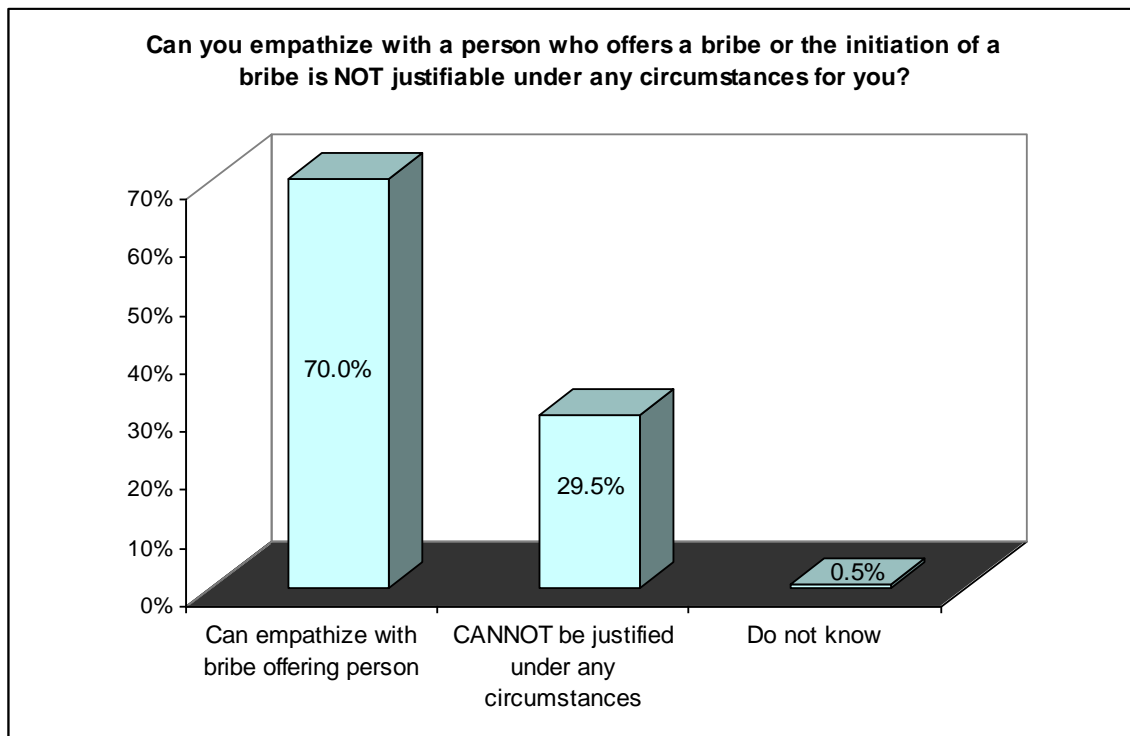
Table 4. Bribing rates among current students who have a choice to avoid illegal educational payments (in %)

	Do you have a choice NOT to give bribes to a professor/administrator at your university?		Total
	Yes	No	

Have the respondent paid a bribe to administrator / professor?	Bribed	61.0	4.5	65.5
	Have NOT bribed	22.0	0.0	22.0
	Unclear	11.5	1.0	12.5
Total		94.5	5.5	100.0

Moreover, almost the same share of current students (62.0%) indicated that they potentially are willing to offer a bribe in any life circumstances. In addition, the majority (70.0%) of current students can understand (can empathize with) another person offering a bribe (see Chart 1).

Chart 1. The rate of sympathy toward a bribe offer among the current students



Moreover, current students having a valid choice to avoid bribes (94.5%) are willing to offer them, despite viewing bribes as negatively affecting the quality of their education. The share of these students (41.5%) nears almost half of the entire pool of respondents in this category (See Table 5).

Table 5. Readiness to offer bribes among current students, who view bribes as negatively affecting the quality of their education (in %)

Do you have a choice NOT to give bribes to a professor/administrator at your university?			Generally (in all the life circumstances) can you imagine a situation in which you would be willing to offer a bribe?		Total
			<u>Yes</u>	No	
<u>Yes</u>	Do you think that bribes have a negative or positive overall effect on your education?	Positive	6.0	2.5	8.5
		Negative	41.5	22.0	63.5
		Neither positive, nor negative	1.0	1.0	2.0
		I do not know. Bribes have not been part of my educational experience	10.0	10.5	20.5
		Total	58.5	36.0	94.5
No	Do you think that bribes have a negative or positive overall effect on your education?	Positive	1.0	0.0	1.0
		Negative	2.5	1.0	3.5
		I do not know. Bribes have not been part of my educational experience	0.0	1.0	1.0
		Total	3.5	2.0	5.5

The Azerbaijani higher education is termed by both demand and offer of bribes. However, an offer side of bribing is stronger. To a considerable extent it is students who sustain graft in the Azerbaijani education system by initiating it. Students themselves contribute to the negative state of their educational experience, simultaneously having a choice to avoid aggravating the quality of their university training. Apart from immediate negative effects on the educational quality, an ‘understanding’ attitude of students towards bribing may hint on a long-term policy difficulty: once the anti-corruption measures are enforced, there is no guarantee that a new policy will be supported by the students. These results also emphasize that confining fight with corruption in higher education to educators will yield modest results, unless commensurate work with students is implemented. The next section takes a discussion a step further by highlighting the

cause behind strong support that bribe offers enjoy among the students of the Azerbaijani universities.

CAUSES OF BRIBE OFFERS IN THE AZERBAIJANI UNIVERSITIES

The analysis of the survey results shows that the main cause behind bribe offers in the higher education in Azerbaijan is the desire of students to get through the educational process without exerting additional effort at studying: all the students want is to attain the status of a graduate, embodied in a university diploma. The status of a graduate (but not knowledge, skills, expertise) is associated with better chances of employment and career progress. To put it short, all an average Azerbaijani student cares about throughout her university education is diploma, and its formal quality (honours or ordinary diploma). The desire to get through the university education and simply receive a diploma causes bribe offers from students even in cases when they are not pressed for bribes. Of course, a student might opt not to offer a bribe if she has a valid option to receive marketable knowledge as a result of putting efforts into studying. However, extreme ineffectiveness of the Azerbaijani higher education (providing unmarketable skills) deprives the student even this option. While the majority of the Azerbaijani students' attitude toward bribing is instrumental (they prefer to co-opt and use bribes to attain a desired aim rather than to oppose bribing), the end result is a wide practice of bribe offers among them. Compared to the share of cynical respondents, the proportion of interviewees guided by integrity (22.7%) and law abidance (1.2%) is insignificant. A low profile of legality among them is a function of a commensurate level of respect to officially sanctioned norms among the Azerbaijani students – the factor that paves the way to bribe offers even in the absence of a bribe demand.

A head-on open-ended question to recent graduates, who reported to offer a bribe to educators, about the reasons for opting to bribe, has revealed that the willingness to get through the educational process without exerting additional effort is the fundamental driver of bribe offers. Almost half of the recent graduates (44.5%) pointed out that the main reason of their bribe offer was their willingness to avoid the “boredom” and

difficulty of university courses (see Table 6). A sizable portion of the remaining respondents indicated another factor showing their unwillingness to invest extra efforts at their studies – a desire to save time on other, “worthier” pursuits (13.3%). These results indicate a relatively modest role that clichés and factors of “group think” play in causing bribe offers at the Azerbaijani universities – a factor that embraces, according to the survey, only 4.4% of bribe offering students.

Table 6. The reasons behind recent graduates’ bribe offers (in %)

What was your reason for bribing your professor/administrator?	
Reasons	Percent
To get better grades / honor degree	17.8
The subject had no direct relation to my specialty or was not adequate to the demands of current job market. Did not want to exert an effort to study it. Instead used my time on more useful pursuits.	13.3
Lack of alternatives - no choice but to bribe. I was forced / given inadequate training by the professor to be able to pass the exam.	11.1
Everybody bribed - I followed suit	4.4
To be able not to attend the university (because I had a job)	8.9
The course was boring / difficult to study	44.5

The conclusion seems startling: if a student enters the university, why she should not consider putting enough effort to study, even if the courses are boring or difficult? Is knowledge provided by the university through courses not the main aim of the student? According to survey results, it is not. An absolute majority (63.8%) of the Azerbaijani students decide to obtain higher education because of the *status* that being a ‘graduate’ entails for their job opportunities (see Table 7). The respondents point to the acquisition of status as the most important reason behind their decision to get higher education. Moreover, 17.8% of the recent graduates pointed out that they pay bribes solely to obtain a better academic record, reflected in their Diplomas (see Table 5).

Table 7. The reasons behind the respondents’ decision to have university training

What is the most important reason that prompted you to seek higher education?		
Reasons for applying to university	Frequency	Percent

The status of a graduate gives a wider chance to get a better-paid job and have better career perspectives	166	63.8
University develops the knowledge and worldview of students	24	9.2
Family's insistence	22	8.5
Because of my inner personal values (to realize my plans, contribute to the well-being of the society)	22	8.5
Keep up with other people	18	6.9
To demonstrate my talents to other people	3	1.2
To avoid serving at army	3	1.2
To be part of intelligentsia	2	0.8

The ‘status’ of a graduate as the main aim of the Azerbaijani students is corroborated by a strong willingness of the current students to keep attending totally ineffective universities simply to get a diploma. The ineffectiveness of the Azerbaijani higher education in providing an adequate training has been noted in a range of studies (Temple, Petrov 2004, 89; Isaxanli, 2005). A substantial portion (63.3%) of recent graduates surveyed in the frames of this study, reported that their education was ineffective in preparing them for the Azerbaijani job market (see Chart 2). Almost half of the recent graduates (51.7%) do not even use their university skills in meeting their day-to-day job responsibilities. Among the skills used most widely in their job, they mentioned the skills not associated with any particular specialty (basic computer skills, foreign language translation skills) (See Chart 3). Only 5 out every 60 of recent graduates report of getting narrow professional skills to perform better on their current job. Thus, all that the majority of the Azerbaijani graduates, according to the survey, usually use in carrying out their job responsibilities is general knowledge, not tied to any narrow field or expertise.

Chart 2. The effectiveness of the university training in helping recent graduates to attain a job after graduation

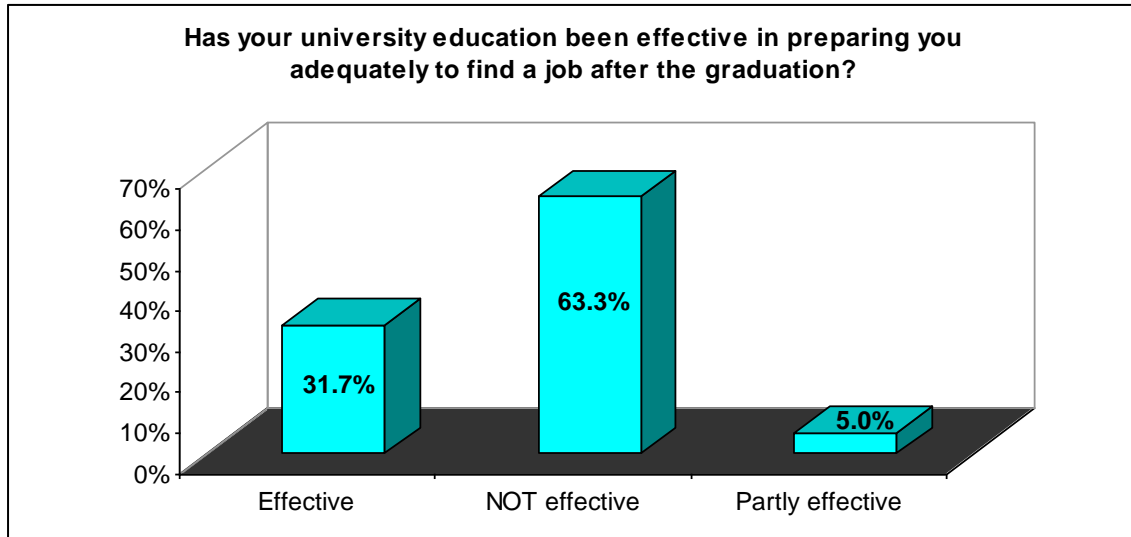
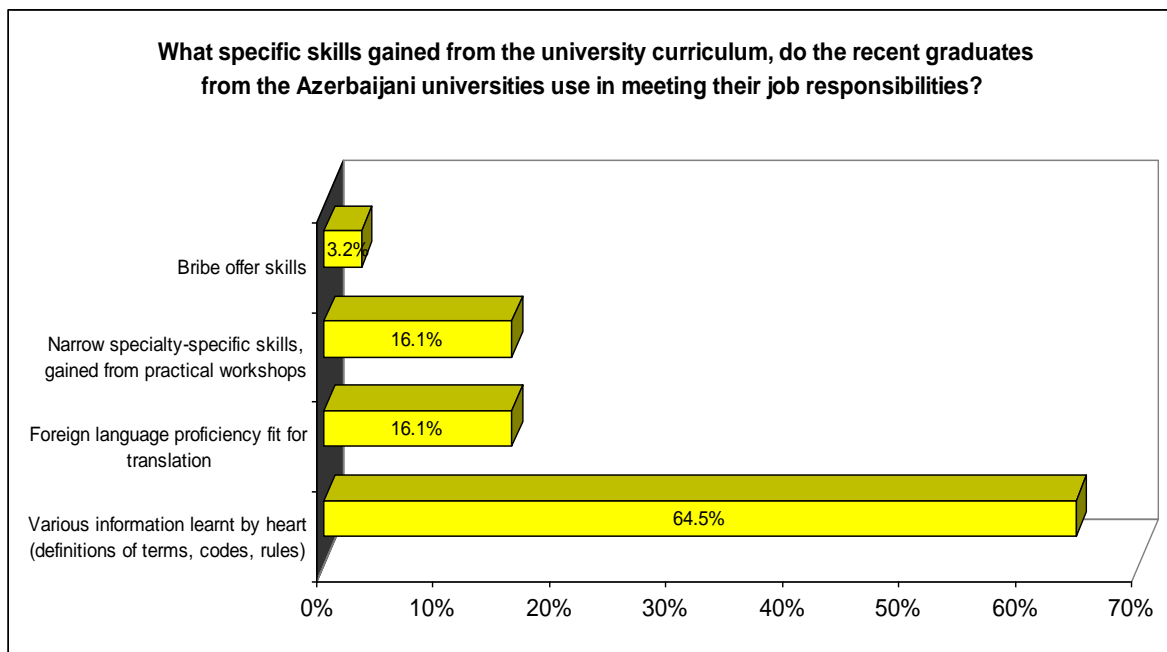


Chart 3. University curriculum skills, used by the recent Azerbaijani graduates to meet their job responsibilities



However, under the circumstances of ineffective education, 94.3% of the current students (who perceive their education ineffective), have nevertheless reported an intention to continue their education (see Table 8). The choice of sticking to the university that does not provide an adequate training can seem strange and irrational at

first. However, a seemingly irrational development becomes perfectly explicable in terms of the acquisition of the ‘status’ of a graduate. Specifically, asked about the reason for choosing to attend a university that provides an inadequate training, a substantial proportion (87.8%) of the current students, reported a desire to get through the educational process and attain a diploma as an end result of it (see Table 9). The survey results show that the student behavior, including the choice to offer bribes, is termed by their desire to get a ‘status’ of a graduate. The students who attend universities only to attain a diploma demonstrate a considerable level of bribe offer rates (see Table 10).

The experts and investigators of higher education in Russian Federation have also pointed to the university attendance for the sake of diploma as a critical factor feeding bribes at the universities. Elena Pakhomova of the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion argues that students majoring in economics are inclined to offer bribes more than students of other majors, because “economics is a field that is chosen often by students without a clear professional orientation. For students who *need simply a diploma*,² no matter what specialty it is from, an economics department fits best” (Kolesnichenko, Lonskaya 2009).

Another factor that relates bribes and a diploma-driven education in Russian Federation is the level of universities. According to Sergey Komkov, the bribes are most widespread in the low quality universities of the “second tier”. A student of Moscow Technical University of Communications and IT (MTUCIT), Yelena Y. insists that in these universities “students pass exams only thanks to bribes. Only the brightest do not pay, but they usually transfer to other universities, because the education level here [at the MTUCIT] is very low, *diploma-driven*”³ (Kolesnichenko, Lonskaya 2009). Yevgeny Bunimovich, the chairman of education committee at Moscow City legislature, also connects bribing with a diploma seeking. He argues that a major cause of bribes is that “... many Russian students need graduation certificates just for the sake of a mere formality” (SRAS 2008).

Table 8. Current students’ attitude toward their university education, which they perceive inadequate in preparing them for the job market.

² Emphasis is mine.

³ Emphasis is mine.

If you perceive the education to be inadequate, what do you plan to do?

	Frequency	Percent
Change the university	4	4.6
Drop the university /NOT study at all	1	1.1
Continue to study	82	94.3

Table 9. Current students' reasons for attending the university which does not provide them with adequate training to meet the job requirements on their chosen career path

Please explain why you choose to continue your education at the university, which does not provide an adequate training?

Reason	Frequency	Percent
I study only to get a university Diploma	72	87.8
Parents/public opinion forbid me to change the university	3	3.7
To get more knowledge about life in general	1	1.2
I do not loose hope that my education will become better the next year next year	4	4.9
Psychological attachment to this particular university	2	2.4

Table 10. The bribing rates among the current students, studying only to get a Diploma (number of respondents)

Do you have a choice NOT to give bribes to a professor/administrator at your university?	Please explain why you choose to continue your education at the university, which does not provide an adequate training?	Have the respondent paid a bribe to administrator / professor?			Total
		Bribed	Have NOT bribed	Unclear	
Yes	<u>I study only to get a Diploma</u>	<u>55</u>	7	3	65
	Parents/public opinion forbid me to change the university	3	0	0	3
	I do not loose hope that my education will become better the next year	1	0	1	2
	Psychological attachment to this particular university	0	1	1	2
	Total	59	8	5	72

No	Please explain why you choose to continue your education at the university, which does not provide an adequate training?	I study only to get a Diploma	5	0	2	7
		To get more knowledge about life in general	1	0	0	1
		I do not loose hope that my education will become better the next year	2	0	0	2
		Total	8	0	2	10

As a result, a seemingly irrational reason of bribe offers simply because of the unwillingness to invest extra efforts into studies (44.5%) among the respondents seems explicable to the backdrop of a ‘status’ driven education. The students enter universities not to study hard and get expertise and knowledge in a field of their choice. All they need is diploma. Of course, the students might have chosen to study hard rather than turn to bribe offers as a way to get through the educational system. However, ineffective higher education, not providing marketable knowledge makes the investment of efforts into studying an empty exercise.

Despite all odds however, the students could have chosen not to offer bribes – considering that 94.5% of them have a valid choice to avoid bribes. However, a low level of respect to officially sanctioned rules among the students makes the rejection of bribes by them improbable. Firstly, the research data shows that there is a strong inverse correlation between both the willingness to bribe and an actual practice of offering a bribe on the one hand, and the abidance to traffic rules on the other (see Tables 12-13). Simultaneously, the survey reveals that the rate of traffic rule abidance by the respondents is low, thus predicting a generally high level of bribe offers among them. **Further researches, studying in-depth the correlation between bribe offer rates and the abidance of social rules among the population seem a productive avenue for the development of our knowledge about corruption.**

Secondly, a very important additional factor that fuels bribe offers is a very low level of resolution to deal with bribing that the Azerbaijani students demonstrate. Specifically, the attitude of the majority of the Azerbaijani students toward bribes is instrumental (see Table 11). 43.1% of students use bribes to secure the attainment of a desired outcome (like better grades, diploma) or simply do not want to exert extra efforts

to get the desired outcome through legal means (19.2%). The students try to exploit the leverage that bribe offering provides rather than opposing it. The rates of bribing practice (around 70.0%) among the respondents perfectly overlap with the attitudes of people toward legality: for 22.7% of the respondents “integrity” is a decisive factor when pondering about bribe offers, while only 1.2% of them are concerned about “legal reprisals”. Apparently, the remaining 76.1% treat bribe offers as a natural part of their social life, without second thoughts about integrity or legality. This finding indicates that bribing is closely tied to an individual’s respect of the rule of law and legality in a society.

Table 11. The major factors affecting the respondents’ choice to offer a bribe

In case, if you are NOT asked for a bribe, what is the most important factor, influencing your decision to bribe or refrain from offering a bribe?

	Frequency	Percent
The attainment of the desired service/outcome for sure	112	43.1
Integrity	59	22.7
Do not want to exert great efforts to get the desired outcome through legal means	50	19.2
I act like everybody else: Pay attention to the practices of other people in relation to bribing in similar situations	20	7.7
Whether I have enough resources to pay a bribe or not	11	4.2
Whether the person whom I plan to offer a bribe is easy to bribe or not	3	1.2
I am afraid of legal consequences of my bribe offer	3	1.2
Whether bribing develops my expertise and skills or not	2	0.8

Table 12. Correlation between bribe offer practice and abidance of traffic rules (in number of cases)

		Have the respondent paid a bribe to administrator / professor?			Total
		Bribed	Have NOT bribed	Unclear	
While crossing the street, how often you wait for the traffic light to turn green?	Never	33	10	5	48
	Seldom (no more than 20 times per 100 crossings)	70	10	4	84
	Randomly (from 21 to 50 times per 100 crossings)	42	6	3	51

Often (from 51 to 75 times per 100 crossings)	10	5	6	21
Regularly (more than 75 times per 100 crossings)	20	29	7	56
Total	175	60	25	260

Table 13. Correlation between bribe offer willingness and abidance of traffic rules (in number of cases)

		While crossing the street, how often you wait for the traffic light to turn green?					Total
		Never	Seldom (no more than 20 times per 100 crossings)	Randomly (from 21 to 50 times per 100 crossings)	Often (from 51 to 75 times per 100 crossings)	Regularly (more than 75 times per 100 crossings)	
Generally (in all the life circumstances) can you imagine a situation in which you would be willing to offer a bribe?	Yes	26	45	32	7	8	118
	No	9	11	7	10	33	70
	It depends	2	2	3	0	5	12
Total		37	58	42	17	46	200

Thus, the resulting voluntary bribe offer rates by the students is a function of their desire simply to get through the educational process without exerting additional effort at studying and attain the *status* of a graduate. Students study to attain a diploma, which embodies a graduate status. However, even under these circumstances, the students could still oppose bribes. Unfortunately, the social climate, dominated by a low respect to official rules and regulations among them paves the way to bribe offers. While students' employment prospect is in their eyes inextricably tied to the acquisition of a diploma (see Table 7), the discussion of the peculiarities of employment in Azerbaijan is necessary before any policy recommendations to fight corruption are offered.

BRIBE OFFERS AT THE UNIVERSITIES AS PART OF THE AZERBAIJANI EMPLOYMENT CONTEXT

Major elements of the employment in Azerbaijan render a university diploma (or similarly, a graduate *status*) production (not knowledge, expertise) as the main function of the local higher education. The central role of *status* as an employment factor can be attributed to active governmental policies of employment, sometimes even running counter to the legislation. Contrary to the Labor Code and major employment legislation, the listing by the government of higher education as a major requirement for public employment, with a simultaneous domination of the state in the Azerbaijani employment market, makes the acquisition of a diploma a vital element of a job application. As a result, the government creates a social milieu, which is dominated by a ‘status’, embodied in diploma, not merit, and skills/knowledge associated with it. This social environment is conducive to bribe offers.

On the other hand, with employment in Azerbaijan dominated by favoritism and nepotistic factors, the acquisition of a ‘status’ of a university graduate serves as an initial social filter for coveted jobs. The second employment filter (i.e., using one’s connections to get a top job or promotion) is usually overcome only by those with strong social capital. This in turn creates among the population an illusion about a diploma as a cause (rather than as an initial filter) of a successful employment (while in reality, ineffective higher education is in itself impotent to accomplish this).

Neither the Labor Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan (February 1999), nor the Law on Employment of the Republic of Azerbaijan (July 2001), or any other significant document regulating employment issues in the country, point to higher education, and specifically to a university diploma as a factor in the process of employment. Both in terms of compensation calculation, and wage norms the official documents do not take educational criteria as a factor to consider. Specifically, section 157 of the Labor Code reads “the standard salary shall be based on the complexity of the job, the speed required

[to meet job requirements], and the level of expertise of the employee” (Labor Code 1999).

However, a higher education is a central requirement for getting a public employment. Specifically, “Regulations on public service employment of the Azerbaijani Republic through competitive examinations” (2009) posits a university diploma as a qualifying requirement for the right to participate in the civil service entrance examinations – and thus, consequently to hold a public office. Moreover, according to the chairman of the State Commission on Public Employment under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SCPEIPAR), since 2011 new regulations will make higher education diploma the single document required to obtain a permit for entering a public service employment examinations (Trend 2011).

On the other hand, the state occupies a central position in the employment market in Azerbaijan. According to van Klaveren et al, “government and state-owned enterprises account for two-thirds (66.5%) of women’s paid employment... [and] just over half (52%) of men’s” in Azerbaijan (van Klaveren, Tijdens, Hughie-Williams, Martin 2010, 14). Considering the fact that “the State in its various guises (many apparently private firms are effectively state-controlled) is the main employer of graduates in countries such as Azerbaijan” (Temple, Petrov 2004, 88), a higher education diploma as an employment barring requirement, with simultaneous extreme ineffectiveness of the universities, creates a propitious ground for a student to offer bribes. Future graduates rush to obtain a university diploma – because there is nothing else to obtain from the university. However, once obtained, a diploma opens up a chance to get employed with the most important employer in the country – the state.

Another important employment-related factor that the Azerbaijani graduates experience, upon entering the job market after the graduation, is a deep seating favoritism, nepotism and cronyism. From local observers (Echo 2006) to the Department of State Investment Climate Statement (2010), there is a strong agreement across the board that “nepotism [is] perfectly acceptable in Azerbaijan” (BBC 2004).

The idea that favoritism is the most important factor of getting the employment was repeatedly underlined by all of the in-depth interview participants of current research – the Azerbaijani university graduates having at least five years of employment track

record on the local job market. Specifically, a male interviewee from province, who graduated from a public university in the capital city, emphasized the preponderant share of low skill jobs in the Azerbaijani economy as the main cause of favoritism: “if the jobs can be performed by everybody [because these jobs do not require much skill], then a boss tends to hire from the closest circle”. An absolutely central role of protection in finding the job has been also emphasized by a male respondent from the capital city (graduate of a public university in the capital), as well as the female respondent from province who graduated from a public university in her local city, and by the female respondent from the capital city – a graduate of a private university in Baku. Thus, the respondents from almost every social background agree that favoritism and protection is the major element of getting a job in the local employment market.

The respondents also pointed to a university diploma and bribes as respectively the second and third (after personal connections) most important factors of getting a job. Interestingly, the respondents mentioned a strong role of diploma in both public and business employment, while bribes were mostly attributed to public service employment. To the backdrop of the preponderant role of favoritism, the interviewees were asked about the reason that drives a person having protection to acquire additionally a university diploma. The male respondent from the capital city (a graduate of a public university) mentioned that diploma serves as a requirement for entering the competition for a job: “diploma is like a pass when you are trying to enter the front-door. However, once you are in the ‘building’ [of a public institution], it is the protection that takes you up through stairs”. The female respondent from province who graduated from a public university in her local city echoed this position: “I can confidently use my connections to help, say, my sibling with getting a job only when she has a diploma. If there is no diploma, it seriously weakens the impact of my connections.” Again, the idea that a diploma serves as an initial filter, which subsequently (after getting a job) enables a person to apply her protection, was underlined by all of the respondents across the board.

All of the mentioned developments can be neatly explained by Robert K. Merton’s means-ends schema (Harrison, Huntington 2000, 116–17). Merton argues that any given society is based on culturally endorsed and sanctioned objectives and approved means of their achievement. At the same time, “social systems also press many who have

little access to the opportunity structure... to seek the dominant goals... Many achievement markets are inherently organized so as to create a large gap between demand (goals and values) and supply (means)” (Harrison, Huntington 2000, 117). In Azerbaijan, an organizing element of the employment market is nepotistic capabilities of a job applicant, while diploma apparently serves a function of the first (entrance level) filter.

To the backdrop of the afore-mentioned factors, the acquisition of a university diploma (not knowledge, expertise or skills associated with the higher education) becomes a vital element of social stratification. On the first stage, an average Azerbaijani citizen goes to university to attain a ‘status’ of a graduate and a diploma as a proof of this ‘status’. This stage is usually passed by students having intellectual capabilities as well as those having nepotistic potential. Graduate ‘status’ serves as an initial social filter to sift those fit for ‘good jobs’. While a university diploma is an employment barring requirement, those who hold a graduate status can get employed. On the second stage, however it is status holding graduates with strong social capital who usually get promoted and make good careers by employing nepotistic capital. Ultimately, a better career is attained through informal connections. But to employ connections effectively, one has to pass the first social filter, i.e. have a formal diploma. It is assumed that person with enough nepotistic potential can successfully pass an initial (diploma level) filter as opposed to the person without strong social capital.

Those graduates that do not have strong social capital (connections), while also lacking marketable skills as graduates of ineffective universities, have considerable difficulties with good employment and promotion. However, ‘success stories’ projected by nepotistic applicants create strong stereotypes among the rest of the population. While the public witnesses only university graduates getting the coveted jobs (and is usually unaware of the real causes of a successful career), a strong stereotype fuses higher education with highly prestigious jobs in a cause-and-effect relationship. It is this phenomenon that explains otherwise hard to interpret survey data: the decision of the majority (82.3%) of the Azerbaijani students to get higher education is formed under the influence of stereotypes and direct pressure from the immediate social surrounding (see Table 14). As a result, the majority of the surveyed students and recent graduates

predictably have not done any research when choosing a specialty to major at the university (see Table 15).

Table 14. The major factors affecting the respondents' choice to apply to the university

What is the most important reason that prompted you to seek higher education?

	Frequency	Percent
Personal choice (based on person's values and long-term plans)	46	17.7
Choice made under the influence of stereotypes and direct pressure of social surrounding	214	82.3

Table 15. The share of respondents, who made a prior research before choosing a university major

Before starting to prepare for admission exams in your group of specialties, had you done any preliminary research about the specialty of your choice?

	Frequency	Percent
Yes, I made a thorough investigation	10	3.8
I did a minor research	54	20.8
No, I have not done any research	196	75.4

To the backdrop of a society with weak formal institutions and lacking “rules of the game” this situation is predictable. Those with a nepotistic potential go to university to make their connections subsequently (after the graduation) work in securing an employment. Those without connections go to university under the influence of a stereotype formed by successful employment practice of the first (nepotistic) group. Informal social ties and nepotistic connections hold the society together to the backdrop of a dysfunctional state, unable to provide and enforce “rules of the game”. At the end of the day, the government creates an employment framework, which is dominated by a ‘status’, embodied in a diploma, not merit. This employment environment invites bribe offers, initiated by students who, in their turn, have a low level of respect to official legally sanctioned norms and regulations.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to the fight with corruption, it is the demand side of it that is usually at the limelight of both academia and policy practitioners. The majority of corruption-related researches (by TI, World Bank and other reputable organization) and the demands of policy reforms (Council of Europe) revolve around governmental adherence to good governance practices.⁴ Therefore, it is assumed that the key to a successful fight with corruption lies in the changes within the government policies. This research has shown that similarly important factor – the practices and attitudes of ordinary citizens toward corruption – is equally, if at times not more, important source, causing and feeding bribes.

The importance of bribe offer rates and specifically citizens' support rate of bribes for the political system is emphasized by the recent (2010-11) popular revolts in the Middle East. An explicit refusal of a wider public to continue support officials' corruption was a major cause of these uprisings. Therefore, a relative balance between bribe demand (public servants' pressure) and bribe offer (wider public's agreement) is a variable which, if analyzed, might contribute to a better understanding of corruption and its impact on various political systems.

The findings of the research prove that uprooting corruption in the Azerbaijani universities is impossible by concentrating solely on educators. In fact, the data shows that offer of bribes embraces broader number of students than bribe demands of educators. The main cause of bribe offers is the desire of students to acquire a higher education diploma (not knowledge, expertise, skills) without putting efforts to study university courses. Alternative explanations are not supported by the research data. 'Group think' and peer pressure to mimicry bribing practices of immediate social surrounding, as a reason behind bribe offers account from 4.4% (among bribe offering recent graduates) to 7.7% of current students, who imitate peers when pondering about an offer of bribes. Nor is there a lack of choice on the part of students to avoid bribes: 94.5%

⁴ A notable exception is the Bribe Payer Index, reflecting the 'supply' side of corruption. However, the Index is confined to business sectors, and does not deal with supply of corruption in public spheres, like education.

of current students mentioned that they have a valid choice to resist effectively bribe demands from educators.

The Azerbaijani social climate, characterized by an agreement between population and government to offer and pay for social ‘status’, invites bribe offers of students, wishing only to attain a university diploma. Firstly, the government creates an employment framework, which is dominated by social ‘status’, embodied in a university diploma, not merit, and skills/knowledge associated with it. Secondly, the higher education in Azerbaijan does not perform knowledge-related functions.⁵ The main purpose of the university education is to serve as an initial social filter for those, nepotistically fit for better paid jobs and professional carrier. And a perception of a diploma (**not** knowledge, expertise, skills) as an ultimate goal of university education emphasizes the main driving force behind the Azerbaijani education system – the production of a ‘status’. Thirdly, students willing to attend the universities, while being clearly aware that these universities do not perform knowledge-related functions, do so to obtain a graduate status – and thus support a status-driven social organization. This research identified a strong inverse correlation between an individual’s abidance to legal rules and the practice of (and willingness to) offer bribes (see Tables 12-13). While the majority of the students demonstrate low level of respect to legality and officially sanctioned social regulations at large, their embrace of bribe offers becomes predictable. By negating legality and empathizing with bribe offerers, the students implicitly agree on the status-driven social organization.

This social environment, in which government and citizens implicitly agree on the primacy of status rather than merit as a factor of social organization, is conducive to bribe offers. The nature of the local achievement market, defined by ‘status’ of a graduate rather than her skills, is the prime factor explaining the puzzle, outlined by Temple and Petrov (2004, 88):

⁵ This in turn explains a range of unique features of higher education in Azerbaijan: a greater share of bribe offer in comparison to educator-driven bribe demand; a substantial influence of stereotypes in a person’s choice to obtain higher education; wide support and ‘understanding’ that bribing enjoys among students; “boredom and difficulty” of university courses as an immediate reason behind student bribe offers; and other similar peculiarities.

The fact of corruption in higher education is well known, inside and outside the country [Azerbaijan], by individual local students and major international organisations. Corruption nevertheless proceeds apace, despite the fact that what is being bought is regarded by many, at home and abroad, as largely worthless.

In the Azerbaijani context, a bought diploma is indeed worthless from a training quality perspective, but not so from a 'status' acquisition point.

These three factors therefore must be at the center of any policy recommendations dealing with the uprooting of bribes in the Azerbaijani higher education. First and foremost, the central role of a university diploma in getting public employment should be reconsidered. Ideally, educational background should be altogether abolished or shrunk to minimum, as a requirement for public job entry – **up to the point when the higher education attains a level of sophistication to serve as an effective criterion of merit.** Otherwise, a crucial role of a university diploma in both hiring and promotion of public servants, to the backdrop of ineffective higher education, breeds bribe offers at the student level.

Closely related to the first recommendation is the development of tighter bonds between employers and higher education institutions, as well as the stimulation of the raise in quality of courses offered at the universities. The extreme ineffectiveness of the higher education forces students to attend universities only for a diploma: they usually have no option to acquire marketable skills in addition to a graduation diploma. As a result, students offer bribes to get through the education system without investing efforts at studying outdated unmarketable courses. The more marketable the taught skills are, the lower will be the inclination of students to turn to bribes, even feeling a need simply to get through the educational process and only attain a diploma.

The third recommendation is to stimulate personal integrity of students to stand up against bribes – both in the guise of an offer and a demand. The research data reveals that the majority of the respondents considers and uses bribe offer as a normal part of their life – they are readily willing to offer bribes without any speculation about either its illegality or moral drawbacks. However, the research also revealed that those students and recent graduates abiding by officially sanctioned norms (traffic rules) are less likely to offer a bribe (see Tables 12 and 13). Thus, **raising the standards of rule abidance of an ordinary student will translate into lower rates of bribe offers among them.**

All these three factors ultimately come together in the need to boost the share of high-skill jobs and stimulate knowledge-intensive sectors of economy. The structure of the Azerbaijani employment, dominated by low skill jobs, to a great extent is responsible for the weak educational standards, and an appreciation of ‘status’ rather than knowledge of a university graduate during recruitment in both public and business sector. As the survey data of recent graduates shows, on average, the requirements of the employers are so plain that students do not even need specialized knowledge in their narrow university majors to get the job. Almost half of the recent graduates (51.7%) do not even use their university skills in meeting their day-to-day job responsibilities. Among those, who use their university skills, the dominant are general knowledge not associated with any particular specialty (basic computer skills, foreign language translation skills) (see Chart 3). This state of the employment market dwarfs the interest in the acquisition of knowledge, expertise, skills through the university education. This in turn creates a drive to offer bribes in order to get through the primitive low-level and not marketable training, provided by the universities. Therefore, raising the share of high-skill jobs will ultimately translate into lower levels of bribe offering among the university students. High skill jobs will also drive the educational reformation, making it more marketable and practice-driven, rather than a producer of a graduate ‘status’.

All of the mentioned initiatives will not only remove the root causes of bribe offers. More importantly, they will affect the very fabric of the Azerbaijani society. Ultimately, any fight with bribes “should focus on the broader political and social context” (Temple, Petrov 2004, 97). Bribe offers are a byproduct of a society-wide consensus. Wider public and government, each in its peculiar way, agree that ‘status’ be a centerpiece of the Azerbaijani achievement market.

The research data shows that neither ‘group think’, peer pressure, nor the lack of choice are serious factors causing bribe offers. At the end of the day, it is an implicit societal consensus on the importance of ‘status’ rather than merit that renders bribe offers an inalienable part of the Azerbaijani social fabric, to the extent that it even exceeds bribe demand rates. More specifically, current organization of the local “achievement market” is termed by the preponderance of ‘status’ as a major means for the achievement of a socially sanctioned objective of public employment. This in turn creates a situation, in

which all kinds of anti-corruption legislation could endlessly provide more or less acceptable new avenues for invoking patronage and favoritism. Unless, the nepotism is made extremely unprofitable in economic terms, there will always be a temptation to employ it by ordinary citizens. Therefore, curbing corruption is impossible without the reconsideration of the existing mechanisms, regulating achievement and social stratification. These mechanisms need to incorporate notions of merit, marginal in contemporary Azerbaijani social milieu.

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