



ILLUSTRATION PER CONCORDIAM STAFF

Good Grades for Sale

Corruption undermines education in Central Asia

Farangis Najibullah, Radio Free Europe

Jovid always dreamed of becoming a police officer, but now he finds himself taking exams to become a tax collector.

“My family couldn’t afford the amount of bribe we would have had to pay to get a place at the police academy,” the 18-year-old high-school graduate said.

Seeking to ensure an affordable future for their son, his parents — farmers in Tajikistan’s northern Maschoh region — instead paid a \$1,000 bribe to ensure their son could enroll to study tax law at a Tajik finance university.

“We had to sell several of our cattle to raise the money,” Jovid said. “The rest we borrowed from relatives. We didn’t have any other choice. I wish it was possible to enter the university with my knowledge, but things don’t work like that here.”

Jovid said the money went to middlemen, who promised to pass it on to the professors who make enrollment decisions based on exam results. But it is a common practice throughout Central Asia, where people say it is a fact of life most university entrants must pay bribes to enroll in institutions of higher education.

PAYING TO LEARN, EARN

In Turkmenistan, there is even a name for such bribes, “elaklyk,” which literally means “giving thanks.” Throughout the region, there are unofficial price lists for different universities and colleges, ranging from \$600 to \$15,000.

For instance, applicants have to pay at least \$2,000 to get a place in the English-language department in Tajikistan’s provincial universities. In Turkmenistan, entrants may pay much more. Depending on the number of people competing for university placement, prices in the most popular schools can be more than \$40,000.

The amount of the bribe often depends on the profitability of the future profession. The most popular among universities are law schools, because people believe lawyers will earn more money in a relatively short period of time.

Alymbek Ata, whose son applied to enter Kyrgyzstan’s Osh University, said he accepts bribery as “today’s real-

ity” and questioning the practice has never crossed his mind. “Other parents who brought their children are paying bribes ... I’m not any different,” he said.

ROT IN THE SYSTEM

The problem of bribery in the education system has been a topic of political debate in Central Asia in recent years. Officials warn that corrupt practices and widespread bribery have severely damaged the quality of education.

High school teachers complain that students skip lessons and don’t take their studies seriously, which raises fears they are not properly prepared as they take the next step in their education. At the university level, corruption does not stop with the entrance exam. Once in the classroom, students routinely pay bribes to get better grades and to pass exams. It is common for professors to have different fees or “stavki,” to pass their exams.

Emil Sarybaev, who studies medicine at Osh University, said some students opt to pay bribes instead of attending classes.

“There are five or six students in my group who don’t show up for lessons but who take care of any problems with the professors. They pay about \$500 to \$600 to pass an exam,” Sarybaev said. “I can’t even imagine what kind of doctors they will become, or how they would treat patients in Kyrgyzstan. I’m afraid that they won’t be able to treat patients — they will kill them.”

Local experts in the region warn that Central Asia is in danger of ending up with a generation of specialists not properly trained in their fields. Many people in the region have already lost their trust in university graduates, particularly in the medical field, leading them to seek out older doctors or graduates of foreign medical schools.

ARREST TEACHERS OR EMPOWER THEM?

Meanwhile, education authorities insist they are fighting the rampant corruption. Several professors — including a teacher at the National Institute of world languages in Turkmenistan, a teacher at Tajikistan’s Khujand Medical College, and two university professors in Bishkek and Osh — lost their jobs in connection with bribery.

Prosecutors in the three countries have opened criminal cases against the professors, who now face corruption charges. Public opinion, however, is unmoved by these individual cases. Few expect that weeding out a handful of offenders can really end the problem. Some even accuse the education officials themselves of being involved in corruption.



AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

“I don’t believe this issue will be solved as long as we have the current officials in place,” said Faridun Rahnavard, an analyst from Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

Some suggest that raising wages for teachers and university professors could help eliminate corruption. State university professors throughout Central Asia receive meager wages, ranging between \$70 and \$400 a month.

There are also concerns that the continuation of unfair practices will deny the children of nonwealthy families the opportunity to build better futures through education.

Regardless of their knowledge level, some young people already consider entering universities as beyond their reach, leading them to instead become migrant laborers. □

Depending on their chosen professions, students in Turkmenistan may have to pay tens of thousands of dollars in bribes for university placement.

Editor’s note: Additional information gathered from the Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty Central Asian services and the International Crisis Group.

FEW OPTIONS AVAILABLE

Central Asian students who cannot enter the educational system have little choice but to turn elsewhere.

“It is not surprising that young people increasingly seek solutions outside mainstream society through alternative options of religion, violence, extremism or migration,” the International Crisis Group reported as early as 2003. The independent, nonpartisan group is a source of analysis and advice to governments and other groups.

“Religion serves both as an escape from everyday problems and a channel through which to criticize the present system,” the crisis group reported. “Radical Islamist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir have been successful in recruiting the disillusioned, providing simplistic answers to questions about the grim reality of their lives. Equal numbers have moved away from Islam to new Christian churches that offer a Western-oriented alternative.”