Politics of Corruption in Albanian Higher Education

Arjan Shahini*, Edvin Zhllima and Drini Imami

Abstract

This paper examines the persistent issue of corruption in Albania, which continues to plague crucial areas of higher education such as learning assessment. Emphasising the significant impact of political influence on student evaluations, the article draws on survey results to address the issue. It suggests that this influence stems from historical factors and current political dynamics. In addition, the paper analyzes the exploitation of anti-corruption rhetoric in higher education as a tool for political control, and discusses the considerable challenges which anti-corruption campaigns face due to political interference and institutional resistance. In conclusion, the paper argues that a holistic approach, considering historical, institutional, and political contexts, is essential for effectively observing corruption in higher education.

Keywords: corruption, informal networks, clientelism, corruptive politics, Albania.

Introduction

Corruption within the education sector continues to be a significant issue in Eastern Europe, as it negatively impacts both students and institutions (Heyneman et al., 2008; Sabic-El-Rayes & Heynemann, 2020). On an individual level, corruption can prove detrimental to a student's educational journey. It lessens the anticipated benefits of education without reducing the associated costs (Duerrenberger & Warning, 2018), causing a disconnection between effort exerted and rewards expected (Chapman & Lindner, 2016). This poses a threat to the students' future careers, as they could become either victims of unfair treatment or, on the other hand, perpetrators (Sabic-El-Rayes & Heyneman, 2020). Furthermore, at the institutional level, corruption can lead to the mismanagement of resources, resulting in declining educational quality (Heyneman, 2020).

Unlike previous research that has primarily focused on understanding the dynamics, attributes, and causes of corruption within education institutions (Duerrenberger & Warning, 2018; Sabharwal & Tierney, 2020; Welch, 2020; Hasiuk et al., 2023), we direct our attention towards political graft and government influence on corrupt practices. In this paper, we argue that unethical conduct among higher education personnel could be a direct consequence of government interference in core university functions. This viewpoint is inspired by Osipian's (2008) study of corruption in Ukrainian higher education, which suggests that state control can foster corruption that seeps from political graft into institutional culture. Based on this argument, we anticipate that professors affiliated with political parties are more prone to allowing political patronage to interfere with their teaching activities, especially in the learning assessment process (grading). To bolster our argument, we utilised not only secondary sources but also a comprehensive survey of Albanian university students on corruption, which was organised by the co-authors of this paper. This survey includes a number of variables for measuring the impact of political influence on university teaching activities.

The paper begins by exploring previous studies and important theoretical concepts related to corruption, informality, and illegality through a review of relevant literature. This foundational analysis establishes the conceptual underpinnings for the subsequent presentation and discussion of the paper's findings and analysis.

*   E-mail of corresponding author: arjan.shahini@gmail.com

Literature review

At the individual level, the theoretical arguments posed by researchers on this matter are based on the fundamental principles of human capital theory, which asserts that education plays a crucial role in developing an individual's skills and knowledge, leading to heightened productivity and increased earning potential. This theory also underscores the vulnerability of education systems to external factors which may potentially hinder their efficacy. Unethical conduct impacts educational outcomes in three primary ways. First, it undermines the worth of human capital and credentials within the labour market (Heyneman et al., 2008). Second, it provides opportunities for further corruption, exploitation and political interventions within universities (Sutrisno, 2020; Zhuang, 2019). Lastly, it socialises and rewards participants in the education process with temptations to engage in corrupt practices in the future (Yearoson et al., 2017; Milovanovitch, 2019).

It is also assumed that the appropriation of educational structures and resources involves the displacement of educational goals by organised political and community interests such as religion, caste and locality (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1973). Politics influences students' lives but also the perceptions, values and coping mechanisms necessary for them to successfully navigate the education process. Student networks and relationships are deeply intertwined with mainstream political and social systems rather than isolated from them. This connection to politics is viewed as part of a broader set of strategies they may employ to benefit from favouritism. Building on the work by Harri et al. (2020), we perceive the use of political influence by students as an integral aspect of both cultural norms within their peer group and their institutional environment.

At the institutional level, paying particular attention to the workings of organisational dynamics may help understand the role that institutions play in addressing corruption and managing influences from external politics. The neo-institutionalist perspective of higher education posits that educational organisations generally experience a higher level of professional autonomy, contributing to a so-called 'loosely coupled' structure (Hasse & Krücken, 2015; Krücken & Drori, 2009; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Nevertheless, to maintain legitimacy, higher education institutions have to adapt to their institutional surroundings 'by conforming to institutionalised norms, values, and expert knowledge' (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 5). In pursuit of public trust and confidence, these institutions interact with their surrounding environment, aiming to shape their dependencies while also addressing external expectations. They do this in line with their intra-organisational characteristics, such as power distribution, values, identities, and the traditions found within their organisation (Gornitzka, 1999).

Researchers have identified various factors that contribute to corruption in higher education in post-socialist countries. These include financial factors, such as inadequate state funding and low salaries, and structural factors, such as poor retirement prospects, and the lack of social capital and gaps derived from the legacy of the vertical and centralised management structure from Soviet-type higher education systems (Petrov & Temple, 2004). However, in instances of political corruption, the primary driver has typically been state control over higher education (Osipian, 2008).

When considering paternalistic ties and informal customs that are ingrained in the socialist past, we come to realise that favouritism and clientelistic practices are even more widespread than bribery (Zhllima et al., 2018). In such environments, the influence of political parties not only undermines university rules but can also alter the way students experience and navigate higher education. Consequently, students might resort to utilising these influences along with their political connections to impact their exam results and sway their professors' evaluations.

Studies scrutinising the prevalence of political influence as a manifestation of corruption in higher education are prominently focused on the Global South (for instances, see Sutrisno 2020 (Indonesia); Zhuang's 2019 (China); Mpanza et al. 2019, Adonteng et al. 2024 (Africa); Elayah 2015 (Yemen)). The impact of political parties on student representation bodies is another point of discussion, as illustrated in Mpanza et al. (2019). They highlight the adverse effects of political parties on student governance bodies, which are compromised in meeting their mandates.

The authors suggest that student representation is often politicised, as political parties aim to mobilize support by establishing financially based relationships. Similarly, Adonteng et al. (2024), in their study on Ghana, found that political parties had effectively marginalised student activism, evidenced by the representation of the National Union of Ghana Students. Elayah (2015), in her case study of Yemeni universities, found that students affiliated with certain political parties, or those with close connections to officials, often receive preferential treatment. Their relationships with those in power give them priority regarding the roles they assume within the university.

Corruption in education in Albania

In the last twenty years, there has been a notable surge in studies exploring corruption within Albanian higher education. This increased focus stems from shifts across generations, the proliferation of the anti-corruption industry, and the politicisation of anti-corruption campaigns.

The perceived corruption among new generations in Albania has necessitated increased scrutiny. Previously, as data from an international survey conducted by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank (2006) shows, most respondents (63 per cent) perceived corruption as being more prevalent prior to the transition period, a sentiment held predominantly by older generations. The survey also discovered that 33 per cent of respondents believed political connections and corrupt practices were more significant than hard work and skills before 1989. However, these practices did not significantly concern either the communist or subsequent regimes, despite their illegality and social unacceptability (Kajsiu, 2016; Meksi, 2016; Zhllima et al., 2018). Such practices persisted and evolved over time, influencing social transactions through both monetary and non-monetary exchanges.

Therefore, as manifested through various forms such as bribery, clientelism and favouritism in other Eastern European countries (Heyneman et al., 2008), the issue of corruption in Albanian education is not new (Schmidt-Neke, 2007; Zhllima et al., 2018) but embedded within a broader 'culture of corruption' prevalent in former socialist countries (Petrov & Temple, 2004). Its roots could be further traced to the period preceding the era of the socialist regime (Osipian, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012; Zaloznaya, 2017).

The global anti-corruption industry has further amplified the corruption problem (Sampson, 2005). This is evident as most corruption studies in Albania are funded by foreign entities.[1] Therefore, primarily motivated by an aspiration to reclaim political control in reaction to decentralisation and neoliberal policy shifts, Albanian governments have capitalised on the proliferation of Western-funded anti-corruption campaigns and institutions. As a result, they have significantly ramped up their involvement and rhetoric in anti-corruption efforts within higher education.

The promulgation of global anti-corruption institutions on the one hand, and the increase in corruption on the other, is what the Albanian critical theorist, calls the *corruption paradox* – 'an intensive and successful anti-corruption effort that coincided with growing levels of corruption' (Kajsiu, 2016, p. 4). The author ascribes the inefficacy of anti-corruption institutions to the failure of both international and national actor to sufficiently address the political and economic issues plaguing the country. By confining corruption solely within the public sector, these actors aimed to rationalise their implementation of neoliberal policies, such as deregulation and privatisation. Consequently, corruption is perceived here not as a cause but rather an outcome of this neoliberal agenda leading to political and economic dysfunction in the country. Similar observations have been made in other Eastern European countries like Poland, where it is assumed that radical anti-corruption initiatives may have inadvertently undermined the rule of law (Makowski, 2016).

In Albanian education, corruption is so widespread that a staggering 70 per cent of Albanians

---

1   The most recent surveys being financed by the European Union (Metamorphosis Foundation, 2017), the American Embassy in Tirana (2015), and two non-governmental organizations, namely the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2019) and Mary Ward Loreto Foundation (2019). A local non-governmental organization has conducted two of the studies (2017, 2018) that gauge the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding corruption at their universities (Qendresa Qytetare, 2017). These surveys share common goals, namely, to expose the magnitude of corruption in order to improve public administration services and support Albania's bid to join the European Union.

surveyed in 2013 by Transparency International perceived their education system as corrupt. This perception is comparable to those in Serbia and Ukraine, which also report high levels of corruption within their education systems (Chapman et al., 2015). Despite differences in sample size and methodology, studies have consistently shown that between 70 and 85 per cent of respondents acknowledge the presence of corruption in Albanian higher education (Centre for Research and Development, 2005; Citizen Centre, 2017; SEDEC, 2012). SEDEC's survey (2012) revealed that only a mere 15 per cent of students at public universities – encompassing four major institutions – strongly opposed bribing their professors. Furthermore, there was a high incidence of corrupt practices reported within these institutions.

Petty corruption, including bribery and allegations of sexual harassment, have had a profound impact on the education sector, eroding its integrity and undermining the fundamental principles of teaching and learning. Numerous undercover media investigations have revealed shocking instances of such corruption that lower education standards and foster mistrust. These range from widespread bribery (e.g., n.a., 2015) that encourages a harmful pay-to-pass culture to unsettling 'sex for grades' scandals (Klan, 2019), that fundamentally breach trust and misuse power within academia. However, despite the alarming revelations made by media outlets, the full extent of this problem remains unclear due to insufficient systematic observation and comprehensive data collection.

Higher education in Albania has experienced every form of corruption across all governance levels, and allegations of corruption have been widespread in the core activities of all public universities and many private ones. This issue affects university management extensively, with allegations of fund mismanagement rife at several public universities, including, but not limited to, those in Tirana, Korça, Shkodra, Elbasan, and Vlora.[2] The government has reacted by centralising some of these processes, such as procurement and admission processes. For instance, in response to widespread corruption in 2006, the government introduced centralised control over the university admission system (Shahini, 2021a). In 2014, the government had to shut down several private education providers due to a multitude of irregularities, including degree milling, inadequate documentation, and insufficient staffing (Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, 2014). Party politics greatly influences public universities, especially during general elections and the elections of university authorities, when candidates rally support from governing or opposition parties or mobilise staff and students on their behalf. This ongoing politicisation has its roots in the student activism of the communist era, persisting through the transition period of the 90s, marked by significant student protests in 1991, 1997, 1998 and 2000.

The research system has also been tainted by allegations of misconduct, particularly concerning plagiarism. This issue is more prevalent among public officials who hold doctoral degrees. A recent study conducted by researchers scrutinised the scientific output of 26 university lecturers, which included eleven professors and other individuals with PhDs. The study found that out of 59 research articles, 52 had inadequate citation practices while 23 contained plagiarised content without any source attribution (Lamallari et al., 2016).

Conceptual framework

Analytical assumptions

Based on the literature, it can be inferred that in a country with a strong culture of political influence, higher education institutions not only adhere to both formal and informal rules set by the political class but also actively shape their relationship with this class through direct involvement in political processes. Therefore, while these institutions strive to maintain

---

2   Examples include reports from the State Audit concerning the University of Shkodra (2013, "Mbi Auditimin e Ushtruar në Universitetin 'Luigj Gurakuqi' Shkodër") and the University of Gjirokaster (2013, "Mbi Auditimin e Ushtruar në Universitetin 'Eqrem Çabej' Gjirokastër"). Additionally, an investigation was conducted in 2016 into bid irregularities at the University of Korça.

legitimacy by adhering to institutionalised norms, they may also attempt to manipulate their external environment through corrupt and unethical activities. This assumption is posited within the context of Albania's political culture where graft, clientelism, and other unethical behaviours are prevalent in both central and academic institutions.

Furthermore, we expect the rampant political corruption and unethical conduct within Albanian higher education institutions to have roots in the informal institutions originating under the previous totalitarian regime (Hensell, 2004; Schmidt-Neke, 1993). The Stalinist regime, while aiming to modernise Albania through centralised planning and swift industrialisation, heavily relied on a parochial political culture and a self-centred administration controlled via ongoing purges and propaganda (Meksi, 2016; Schmidt-Neke, 1993). Although it is worth noting that despite the regime being personified through the authoritarian leader, Enver Hoxha, and political patronage, officials at all levels across the country managed to establish their own personal dominions through extended family connections, nepotism and informal networks.

Furthermore, modelled after the Soviet higher education system, the Albanian system was significantly influenced and controlled by the communist party (Duro, 2012; Kambo, 2005; Roucek, 1958; Shahini, 2024; Thomas, 1969). The Albanian Labour Party had a substantial impact on decision-making related to most university activities. This influence ranged from lesson plans to appointing professors and administrative officials. The party exerted its control both through the Ministry of Education and directly with higher education institutions, including the State University of Tirana, which had its own party organisation. Besides its political dominance over educational matters, the party also relied on informal power structures to sway activities within higher education. Moreover, within the framework of the regime's social engineering projects claiming to favour the working class and efforts to control access to superior job opportunities in the administrative sector, admission to higher education was restricted and selective. Consequently, because degrees were seen as positional goods or status symbols, control over higher education by the Labour Party presented an opportunity for state officials to convert access to such education and academic credentials into intangible assets.

Similar to the situation demonstrated in Ukraine (Osipian, 2009, 2010), despite efforts towards decentralisation made since the 2000s in areas such as management, finance, and teaching in Albania, the government's role remains strong. This is particularly evident in oversight, management, finance and student admission policies (Shahini, 2024). For instance, government representatives make up most administration boards, and regulations on public spending dictate financing. The demand for compliance with these government regulations coupled with recent anti-corruption initiatives provide opportunities for government and party officials to illicitly extract required services from university professors.

Despite the decline in political affiliation and activism among professors and students in Albania by the late 1980s due to the rise of technocrats (Lleshi & Starova, 2017; Shahini, 2021b), political affiliation remained relevant throughout the socialist era as well as during the post-socialist period. Public institutions have been and continue to be under the control and influence of the political system. Consequently, the authors observe that academic promotions for professors and other academic staff members, along with job opportunities for students, have been generally more accessible when affiliated with one of the major political parties. Although higher education laws (2007, 2015) grant significant autonomy to universities concerning academic matters such as staff recruitment, academic promotion and administrative issues. This situation has propelled the growth of favouritism, established clientelism, and created networks based on party membership. It has become commonplace for politically active professors to favour students from their own political party, often trying to persuade colleagues to award these students pass or superior grades. Anecdotal evidence suggests that leaders of major political parties have even personally asked professors within their party ranks to help activist students pass exams.

Normative framework

Universities in developed countries utilise various mechanisms to ensure adherence to professional standards and combat corruption. These mechanisms encompass codes of conduct that delineate expected behaviours for staff, students and administrators. Typically, these codes incorporate provisions related to integrity, ethical behaviour, and compliance with laws and regulations. Another mechanism is the formation of Ethics Committees tasked with overseeing ethical issues and investigating complaints, including those about corruption. At a central level, whistle-blower policies are encouraged which also include universities (Kirya, 2019). These policies enable individuals to confidentially report suspected unethical behaviour or corruption without fear of retaliation. Universities offer training and education on ethics, integrity, and anti-corruption measures to their staff members, students and administrators. Transparency is increased by providing timely information to the public about university governance operations, finances and the decision-making process.

Internationalisation is also essential not only to promote new value and new mechanisms but also to reduce the monopolistic power of the government. For instance, Osipian (2017) suggests that the state itself poses a significant obstacle to the expansion of university autonomy. The state maintains almost exclusive control over university guidance which hinders true autonomy in those few institutions potentially capable of implementing it successfully. According to Osipian (2017), a viable path would be to expose universities to international technical assistance, expert advice, and in many instances direct management and governance. However, this approach may only work when internal forces and conditions are prepared for substantial change.

The effectiveness of measures aimed at tackling corruption in universities is a matter of serious concern. There are four main strategies to enhance this effectiveness. The first strategy pertains to central pressure. In Romania, the implementation of an independent university ranking system that incorporates academic integrity and financial probity as assessment criteria has facilitated greater transparency and fostered competition among universities (Trines, 2017). The second strategy involves the inclusion of both students and academic staff. Zamaletdinov et al. (2016) found that activities involving both students and academic staff, such as electronic reporting of grades and the development of ethical codes, have led to progress in Russian universities. Increasing the influence of professional associations and other entities which licence professionals can also contribute significantly due to their vested interest in maintaining quality standards; they act as watchdogs preventing individuals implicated in academic corruption from practicing their profession. For example, human and animal medicine associations often exert pressure on universities by issuing codes of conduct for professionals to adhere to since these organisations are subject to licensing requirements themselves. These codes are frequently taught to university students as part of their curriculum (Zamaletdinov et al., 2016).

Third, the implementation of robust monitoring and quality assurance processes, paired with strict sanctions, are critical in identifying corruption and upholding disciplinary measures, as this reduces the risk of corruption within these institutions. Regulatory agencies in Uganda and Kenya serve as exemplars, having played an instrumental role in uncovering dishonestly obtained degrees and pushing for their nullification (Trines, 2017). Similar rigid monitoring systems have yielded positive results in countries with high levels of corruption. As an illustration, Borcan et al. (2017) refer to a campaign designed to raise awareness about the consequences faced by teachers and students engaged in bribery; an initiative involving the implementation of closed-circuit TV (CCTV) monitoring during exams. As evidenced from the reduction in student scores achieved fraudulently, the effectiveness of these measures depended largely on their consistent enforcement. These strategies have also been employed in Nigeria (Eziechina et al., 2017), although there is no evidence yet regarding their effectiveness.

Research design

Building on the analytical framework presented above, this study examines student perceptions of political influence and its correlation with other forms of corruption. It also investigates whether variations in the prevalence of corruption exist in different institutional categories. We propose that students in private institutions might report lower levels of corruption due to reduced government interference, while those in regional universities could experience increased corruption because of close-knit communities and stronger political affiliations stemming from family ties.

To explore the associations between political influence, clientelism, favoritism, and bribery, the study uses a dataset from a structured survey. The survey, conducted in 2012, encompassed 2,028 undergraduate students from a range of disciplines across two private and four public universities, two of which are in the capital (Tirana), while the other two are located in two different regions. Less than 20% of the sample is composed of private university students. A larger part of the sample is composed of female students, with only 335 being males. This structure is also reflected in the overall population of students in Albanian universities in 2012. To maintain confidentiality, specific regions and university names are omitted in this paper (see Table 1). The participant cohort was evenly divided between first and third-year undergraduate students, with 20–30 students from each academic year per faculty. Over 65 per cent of surveyed students were female, and their ages spanned between 18 and 34 years, with an average age of 21.

The reason for choosing this dataset is that, out of the seven surveys assessed by the authors, only two (Qendra për Kërkim e Zhvillim, 2005; SECED, 2012) provided a significant and representative sample in terms of student numbers and institutional diversity. The method used in the surveys was guided by two of the authors of this paper, granting complete access to question formats and variable structures.

Table 1. Descriptive data on the demographics of the sample

Gender	Private Universities			Public Universities				Total
	A	B	C	A (Regional)	B (Tirana)	C (Tirana)	D (Regional)	
Male	104	4	29	102	57	250	122	668
	15.6 %	0.6 %	4.3 %	15.3 %	8.5 %	37.4 %	18.3 %	100 %
Female	185	8	39	157	118	570	236	1313
	14.1 %	0.6 %	3 %	12 %	9 %	43.4 %	18 %	100 %
NA	9	1	1	6	6	16	8	47
	19.1 %	2.1 %	2.1 %	12.8 %	12.8 %	34 %	17 %	100 %
Total	298	13	69	265	181	836	366	2028
	14.7 %	0.6 %	3.4 %	13.1 %	8.9 %	41.2 %	18 %	100 %

Source: SECED, 2012, Corruption survey database

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, with the analysis performed using R software (2020). The results are presented in the form of tables and graphs. Nonparametric tests, specifically the Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon proportion tests, were used as needed to assess any significant differences. To ensure the representativeness of the sample, calculations and applications of imputations and post-stratification weights were conducted throughout the analysis (Lumley, 2004; Su et al., 2011).

Results

The results of the survey clearly illustrate that corruption and political influence pose significant challenges in Albanian higher education. Forty per cent of the students affirmed that their academic scores could be improved if they voted for a professor's party (see Figure 1). A striking majority of students (72%) also believe that affiliation with a professor's political party influences their grades, while only 28% chose the 'not at all' option. In addition, over half of the respondents (55%) acknowledged that offering bribes or having personal connections with their professors may secure better grades. These findings suggest that within the context of Albanian universities, political sway and personal connections are perceived as pivotal contributors to academic success.
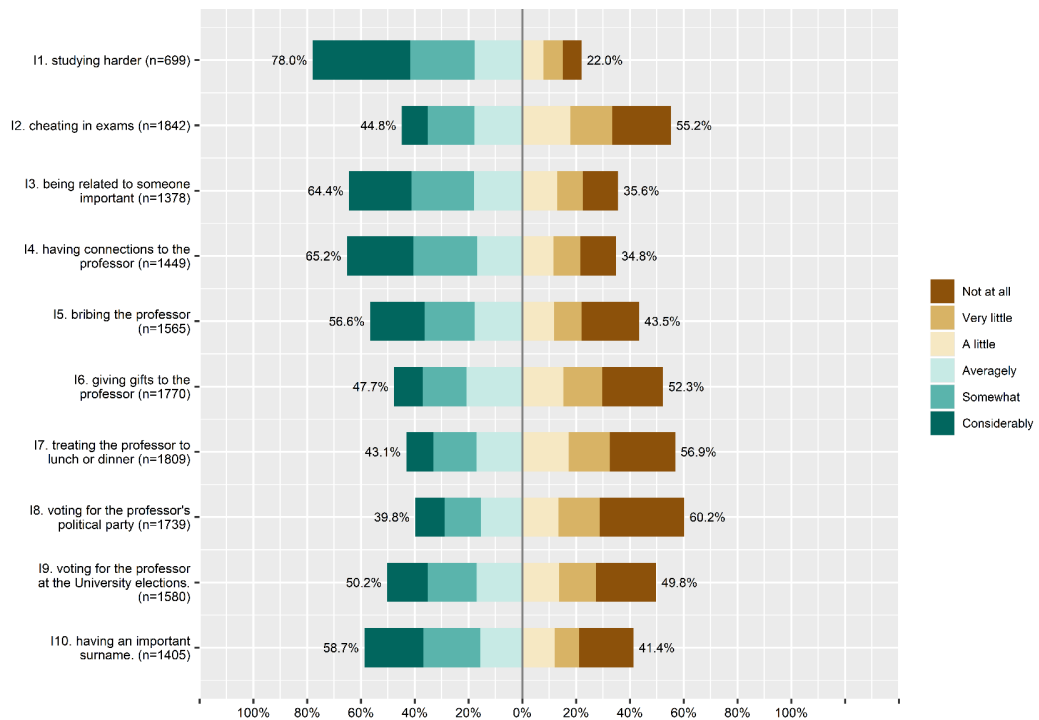

Figure 1. Answer to the question: 'How much do you think it helps students to get better grades by . . . "

Source: SECED, 2012, Corruption survey database

The analysis of the survey data revealed that item I8, which measures the extent to which voting for a professor's political party could affect a student's grade, showed a statistically significant correlation (p-value < 0.05) with the corruption component (measured by items I2–I10). This corruption component exhibited a high inter-item correlation of 0.78 and a Cronbach's α of 0.89, as shown in Figure 2. In addition, item I8 was found to be positively correlated with individual items I9 (voting for the professor at university elections; inter-item correlation of 0.65), I6 (giving a gift; 0.56), and I7 (treating the professor to lunch; 0.57), but negatively correlated with I1 (studying harder). The mean inter-item correlation for this construct was below 0.38. The inter-item correlation among the questions ranged from 0.30 to 0.49, with a Cronbach's α of 0.86. These findings suggest a link between political influence and bribery within the academic setting.
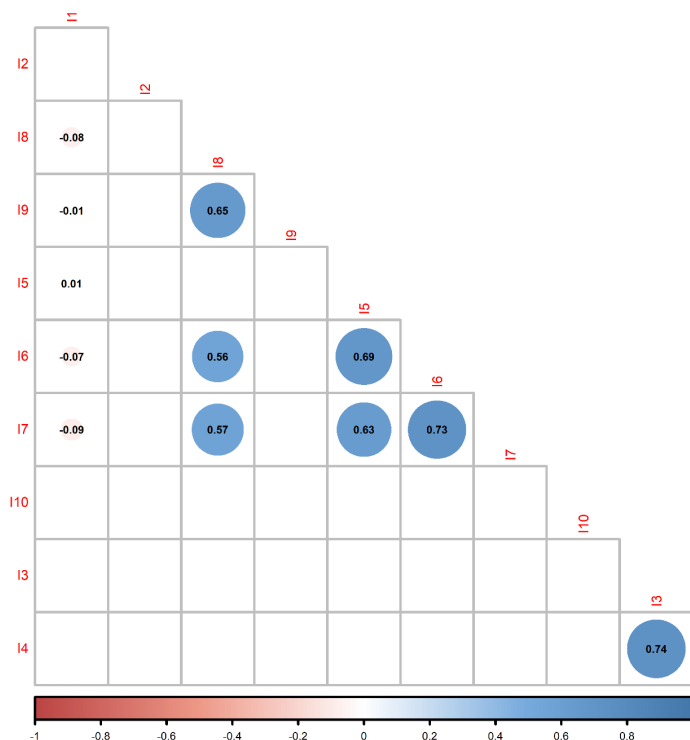
Figure 2. Inter-item correlation for question I

Note: Cells coloured if p-value is greater than or equal to 0.05

Source: SECED, 2012, Corruption survey database

Regarding item I8, which explores how students' grades may be influenced by their professors' political affiliations (refer to Figures 3 and 4), there were noteworthy disparities[3] between regional universities and universities in the capital, where students showed a greater tendency to support their professors' political party. Private universities, as expected, appeared to be less swayed by their professors' political leanings, although the differences did not reach statistical significance.[4]

---

3   Verified through Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon proportion tests with a p-value threshold of <0.05. (χ^2 = 13.216, df = 6, p-value = 0.04).

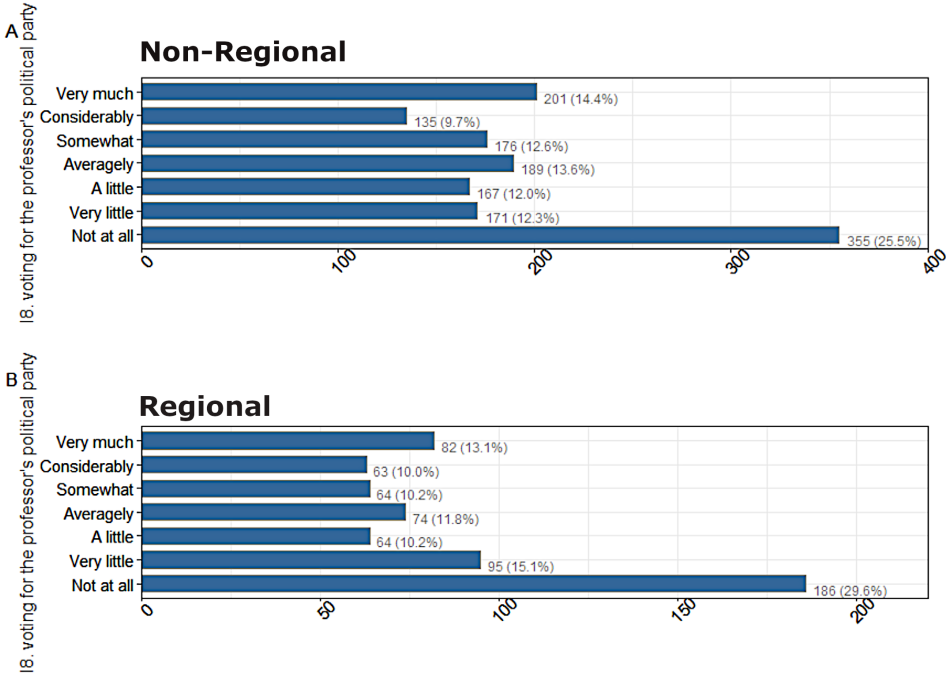4 χ^2 = 9.8384, df = 6, p-value = 0.1316.

Figure 3. Political affiliation of the professors on students' voting behaviour. Regional and non-regional universities

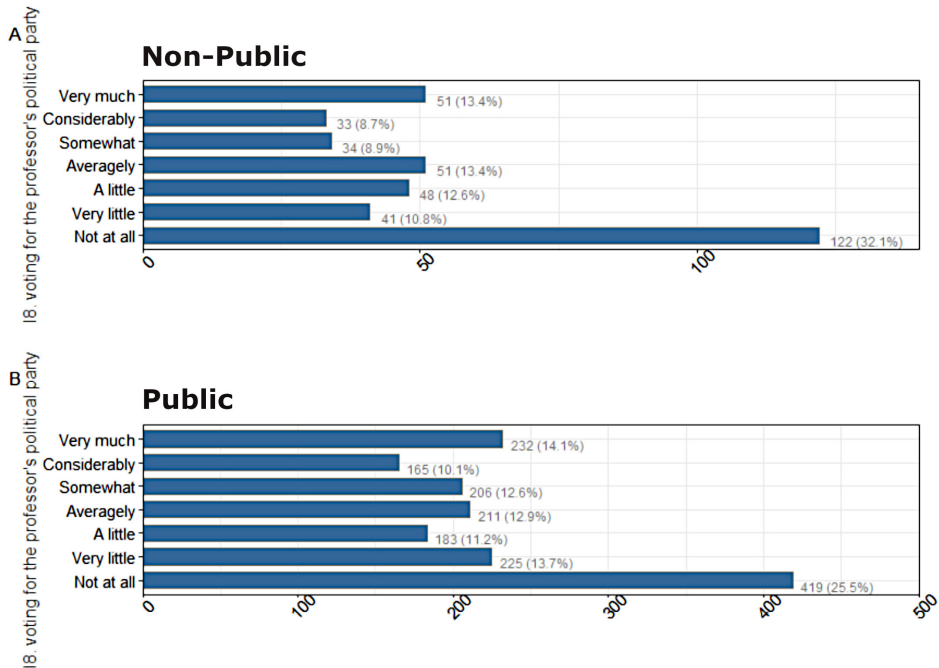*Source:* SECED, 2012, Corruption survey database

Figure 4. Political affiliation of the professors on students' voting behaviour. Public and non-public

Source: SECED, 2012, Corruption survey database

Discussion

Two primary factors contribute to political interventions undermining efforts to restore integrity within the Albanian higher education system. First, party affiliations adversely affect the internal and autonomous processes of universities, as well as the academic community at large. Second, the politicisation of the anti-corruption discourse has been exploited to justify government interference in the internal affairs of educational institutions.

It has been suggested that in addition to utilising the legal system, corruption can be effectively tackled by implementing robust professional regulations and strengthening the oversight provided by relevant professional bodies (Heyneman, 2020). Nevertheless, this approach necessitates a more proactive stance from universities rather than the traditional intellectual lethargy and institutional inertia observed in similar cases (see Heyneman, 2009, p. 104). It is essential to recognise that political interference, particularly in matters such as appointments or legal sanctions, may jeopardise the effectiveness of these efforts.

For example, following the enactment of the new higher education law in 2007 and its subsequent amendments, which granted universities increased financial and managerial autonomy, these institutions displayed a notable passivity in updating their internal regulations. Between 2009 and 2012, universities were hesitant to independently develop codes of ethics for students and faculty, research ethics guidelines, or establish regulations and responsible bodies for quality assurance, even when encouraged to do so. Moreover, they were disinclined to adopt propositions from the Ministry of Education that had been designed by international experts.[5] Consequently, in regard to research management, the government took advantage of the institutional inertia and overstepped its authority by first creating research ethics guidelines in 2013, and subsequently drafting a law on research ethics in 2018.[6]

It should also be recognised that the state may seek to weaponise anti-corruption measures and discourse in order to exert control over higher education institutions. The anti-corruption discourse presents opportunities for political graft and other forms of undue influence, making universities vulnerable to such manipulation.

For instance in Albania, in response to the student protests of 2018 – the largest since the downfall of the totalitarian regime in December 1990 – the government established an online platform where students could report instances of corruption or other unofficial practices at their universities.[7] In addition, the government addressed the issue of plagiarism by establishing a government-controlled organisation dedicated to identifying and combating such infractions. Critics quickly dubbed these efforts as a 'witch-hunt' and identified such interventions as a government manoeuvre to stifle opposition to higher education policies, violete academic integrity and sow discord among students and faculty members (Dervishi, 2018; Fuga, 2019). By employing these strategies, the government managed to shift focus away from the core demands of students, particularly those concerning the rising costs of education. Instead, it sowed seeds of discord between students and faculty. As a result, the government successfully tied its anti-corruption efforts in higher education to its broader anti-corruption narrative in politics. This manoeuvre allowed the government to justify its involvement in political conflicts both within and outside the university realm. Therefore, there is a general suspicion about the real motives behind the

---

5   The first author was a high level public employee at the Ministry of Education from 2010 to 2013 involved with the work of international experts and the reform of higher education.

6   See Ministerial Order No. 105/2012 "Per miratimin e rregullores per "Etiken ne veprimtarine kerkimore dhe botuese"" [On the ethics of research and publishing activities]. And in 2018 – *Për kodin e sjelljes për integritet në kërkimin shkencor në Republikën e Shqipërisë* [For the code of conduct in research in the Republic of Albania.]

7   See http://shqiperiaqeduam.al. Here students are invited to question and critique the policies and abusive practices of the university administration. Accessed on 12.06.2019.

government's efforts to change the public perception of corruption[8] that targets public opinion[9] and lately the legal realm.

Conclusion

Corruption is prevalent and deeply ingrained within Albanian higher education, casting a shadow over critical aspects such as admissions, academic promotions, and the integrity of research. Petty corrupt practices, including bribery, favouritism, and political influence, are pervasive. The research findings suggest that students perceive political affiliations as influencing the process of evaluating students. This observation aligns with the researchers' beliefs that non-academic factors, such as political preferences and affiliations, impact grading procedures. The intertwining of corruption and political influence undermines the system's integrity, corrodes trust, and jeopardises the quality of the education imparted.

Historically, political engagement has been a key factor in obtaining preferential treatment, such as job and education opportunities (Drishti et al., 2023). While the practice of favouring politically active individuals may not immediately provoke controversy because of the legacy of political centralisation during the communist era, it is essential to delve deeper into the underlying processes at play where governing parties monopolise access to government jobs and resources (Elbasani & Šabić, 2007). Future studies should investigate the impact of particracy on the administration and management of human resources in Albanian public universities. Gaining insight into this process is vital for enhancing transparency and accountability in higher education, as well as fighting corruption.

In this regard, efforts to combat corruption in Albanian higher education face significant challenges. While there have been attempts to implement anti-corruption measures, political interference and institutional inertia hinder their effectiveness. Moreover, the politicisation of the anti-corruption discourse can be exploited by the government to control universities and suppress dissent.

In conclusion, the persistent corruption in Albanian higher education may be addressed effectively through targeted interventions that also consider the influence of historical legacies, cultural norms, and political structures. Increasing internationalization, adapting international best practices of accountability, and employing the resources and expertise of the international network of higher education institutions may also further boost these interventions.

Despite this study relying on a survey carried out nearly a decade ago, it offers valuable insights into persistent corruption trends. Numerous aspects, particularly the most recent government interventions to regain political control over the Academy of Science and the regional universities (Shahini, 2023), continue to characterise the landscape of Albanian higher education and research.

Nonetheless, several facets and manifestations of corruption have evolved in response to shifts in the higher education environment. The more traditional external pressures of corruption, borne out of the expansion of higher education during the time the survey was conducted (2010–2013), have undergone a transition. Currently, regional universities in particular grapple with the challenges posed by demographic changes and declining higher education enrolments. Consequently, under such internal pressure, universities have an array of degree programmes with admission quotas significantly exceeding applicant numbers. As these institutions strive to sustain active study programmes, the emphasis of corruption pressure has shifted more internally, leading to the erosion of internal quality assurance and compromising admission and academic standards more generally – an important consideration for future research.

---

8   The corruption index continues to be relatively high for Albania, reaching its peak in 2016 (39), and oscillating between 33 in 2010 to 36 in 2022. (*Albania - Transparency.org*, 2023)

9   The government has created a plethora of online platforms, most of which were short-lived, as was the strategy to denounce corruption in the Facebook public profile of the Prime Minister of Albania during the election campaign of 2017. Unsurprisingly, it lost sight of these platforms and became an easy target for hackers. For instance, the website of the Ministry of Justice has been closed. See http://stopkorrupsioni.al. (Web Archive: https://web.archive.org/web/20180105071806/http://stat.stopkorrupsionit.al/), Access: 12.06.2019

References

Adonteng, S. S., Kodjie, J., Junior, E. N., & Potton, C. A. G. (2024). Influence of political parties on the National Union of Ghana Students: A study of contemporary trends. In M. Klemencic (Ed.), *The Bloomsbury handbook of student politics and representation in higher education* (pp. 147). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Borcan, O., Lindahl, M., & Mitrut, A. (2017). Fighting corruption in education: What works and who benefits? *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 9(1), 180–209.

Chapman, C., Muijs, D., Reynolds, D., Sammons, P., & Teddlie, C. (2015). *The Routledge international handbook of educational effectiveness and improvement: Research, policy, and practice.* Routledge.

Chapman, D. W., & Lindner, S. (2016). Degrees of integrity: The threat of corruption in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(2), 247–268.

Denisova-Schmidt, E., & Prytula, Y. (2020). Endemic corruption in higher education: Lessons from Ukraine. In E. Denisova-Schmidt (Ed.), *Corruption in higher education: Global challenges and responses* (pp. 20–24). Brill.

Dervishi, I. (2018, December 7). *Studentët vazhdojnë protestat deri në plotësimin e të gjitha kërkesave [Students continue their protests until all demands are met].* Reporter.al. https://www.reporter.al/2018/12/07/studentet-vazhdojne-protestat-deri-ne-plotesimin-e-te-gjitha-kerkesave/.

Drishti, E., Kopliku, B., & Imami, D. (2023). Active political engagement, political patronage and local labour markets–The example of Shkoder. *International Journal of Manpower*, 44(6), 1118–1142.

Duerrenberger, N., & Warning, S. (2018). Corruption and education in developing countries: The role of public vs. private funding of higher education. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 62, 217–225.

Duro, C. (2012). Arsimi i larte ne Shqiperi 1946–1968 [Higher Education in Albania 1946–1968] [Doctoral dissertation, University of Tirana]. http://www.doktoratura.unitir.edu.al/2013/08/doktoratura-clirim-duro-fakulteti-i-histori-filologjise-departamenti-i-historise/

Elayah, J. A. (2015). The impact of political parties and regional discrimination on the quality of education in Yemeni universities. *Frontiers of Language and Teaching*, 6.

Elbasani, A., & Šabić, S. Š. (2017). Rule of law, corruption and democratic accountability in the course of EU enlargement. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(9), 1317–1335. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1315162

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development & World Bank (2006). *Life in transition survey I.* https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/economic-research-and-data/data/lits.html

Eziechina, A. M., Ugboaja, U. C., & Esiagu, U. E. (2017). Closed-circuit television surveillance: An antidote to examination malpractice in high institutions in Nigeria. *American Journal of Engineering Research, 6*(12), 247–251.

Fuga, A. (2019). Kamzhiku i qeverisë mbi liritë universitare dhe të mendimit shkencor. [The government's whip on university freedoms and scientific thought] *Tirana Today*. https://tiranatoday.al/kamzhiku-i-qeverise-mbi-lirite-universitare-dhe-te-mendimit-shkencor/

n.a. (2015, October 14). "Fiks Fare": Pedagogu i Drejtësisë kërkon 500 euro për dy provime ["Head On": The Justice Professor demands 500 euros for two exams]. *Gazeta Shqip*. http://www.gazeta-shqip.com/lajme/2015/10/14/fiks-fare-pedagogu-i-drejtesise-kerkon-500-euro-per-dy-provime/

Gornitzka, Å. (1999). Governmental policies and organisational change in higher education. *Higher Education, 38*(1), 5–31. https://doi.org/10.2307/3448025

Harri, A., Zhllima, E., Imami, D., & Coatney, K. T. (2020). Effects of subject pool culture and institutional environment on corruption: Experimental evidence from Albania. *Economic Systems*, 44(2). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecosys.2020.100783

Hasiuk, I., Darmanska, I., & Nahornyi, Y. (2023). Factor analysis of causes of corruption risks in the educational and scientific sphere of Ukraine. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 100. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102803

Hasse, R., & Krücken, G. (2015). Decoupling and coupling in education. In B. Holzer, F. Kastner, & T. Verron (Eds.), *From globalization to world society. Neo-institutional and systems-theoretical perspectives* (pp. 197–214). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315772967

Hensell, S. (2004). Regieren in Albanien Herrschaftslogik und Zerfall eines Familienstaates. *WeltTrends, 12*(45), 71–83.

Heyneman, S. J. (2020). Corruption in the Education Sector. In A. Graycar (Ed.), *Handbook in Corruption, Ethics, and Integrity in Public Administration* (pp. 129–138). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Heyneman, S. P. (2009). Moral standards and the professor: A study of faculty at universities in Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In S.P. Heyneman (Ed.), *Buying your way into heaven: Education and corruption in international perspective* (pp. 79–108). Sense Publisher.

Heyneman, S. P., Anderson, K. H., & Nuraliyeva, N. (2008). The cost of corruption in higher education. *Comparative Education Review, 52*(1), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1086/524367

Kajsiu, B. (2016). *A discourse analysis of corruption: Instituting neoliberalism against corruption in Albania, 1998-2005*. Routledge.

Kambo, E. (2005). *Arsimi në Shqipëri [Education in Albania] (1945-1960)*. Mësonjëtorja.

Kirya, M. (2019). *Corruption in universities: Paths to integrity in the higher education subsector.* U4: Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, 10. https://www.u4.no/publications/corruption-in-universities-paths-to-integrity-in-the-higher-education-subsector/fullversion#introduction

Klan TV. (2019, September 17). STOP [TV broadcast]. TV Klan.

Krücken, G., & Drori, G. S. (2009). World society: A theory and a research program in context. In G. Krücken & G. S. Drori (Eds.), *The writings of John W. Meyer* (pp. 3–35). Oxford University Press.

Lamallari, B., Madhi, G., & Shpuza, M. (2016). *Academic (dis)honesty in Albania: Concerns on plagiarism* [Working Paper]. Instituti për Demokraci dhe Ndërmjetësim.

Lleshi, S., & Starova, T. (2017). The autonomisation of the cultural field in late socialist Albania and the emergence of early sociological research. In Stan Rzeczy (Eds.) *Sociology Under State Socialism*, 2(13), 119–144.

Lumley, T. (2004). Analysis of complex survey samples. *Journal of Statistical Software*, 9(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v009.i08

Makowski, G. (2016). Diffusion of corruption in Poland. In T. Tänzler, K. Maras, & A. Giannakopoulos (Eds.), *The social construction of corruption in Europe* (pp. 183–212). Routledge.

Meksi, S. (2016). Stalinizmi shqiptar: Një vështrim nga poshtë. (Aspekte politike dhe shoqërore të sistemit stalinist shqiptar në vitet 1960–1961) [Albanian Stalinism from Below: Political and social aspects of the Albanian Stalinist system in the period of 1960-1961] [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Tirana]. https://unitir.edu.al/stalinizmi-shqiptar-nje-veshtrim-nga-poshte-aspekte-politike-dhe-shoqerore-te-sistemit-stalinist-shqiptar-ne-vitet-1960-1961-2/

Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), 340–363.

Milovanovitch, M. (2019). Expectations, distrust, and corruption in education: Findings on prevention through education improvement. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 21(1), 7–22.

Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (2014). *Përmbledhje e raportit të verifikimit të kritereve të ligjshmërisë në institucionet e arsimit të lartë, publike e private në vend. [Summary of the report on the verification of the criteria of legality in the public and private higher education institutions in Albania.]* Unpublished government report.

Mpanza, S. E., Adetiba, T. C., Mlambo, D. N., & Mlambo, V. H. (2019). Political parties and students union government elections in South Africa's tertiary institutions: The case of University of Zululand. *African Renaissance*, 16(3), 91–106.

Osipian, A. L. (2008). Political graft and education corruption in Ukraine: Compliance, collusion, and control. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 16(4), 323–344.

Osipian, A. L. (2009). Corruption and reform in higher education in Ukraine. *Comparative and International Education*, 38(2), 104–122.

Osipian, A. L. (2010). Corruption in the politicized university: Lessons for Ukraine's 2010 presidential elections. *Innovation–the European Journal of Social Science Research, 23*(2), 101–114.

Osipian, A. L. (2012). Education corruption, reform, and growth: Case of post-soviet Russia. *Journal of Eurasian Studies, 3*(1), 20–29.

Osipian, A. L. (2017). University autonomy in Ukraine: Higher education corruption and the state. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies, 50*(3), 233–243.

Petrov, G., & Temple, P. (2004). Corruption in higher education. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 16(2), 83–99.

Qendra për Kërkim e Zhvillim [CRD]. (2005). Vlerësimi i transparencës në arsimin e lartë [Assessment of transparency in higher education] [Report]. https://www.scribd.com/doc/122698478/Vleresimi-i-transparences-ne-arsimin-e-larte

Qëndresa Qytetare. (2017). Qëndresa qytetare [Citizen resistance] [Report]. http://qendresaqytetare.al/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Korrupsioni.pdf

R Core Team (2020). *R: A language and environment for statistical computing.* https://www.R-project.org/.

Roucek, J. S. (1958). The sovietization of Albanian education. *The Slavic and East European Journal, 2*(1), 55–60. https://doi.org/10.2307/304697

Rudolph, S. H., & Rudolph, L. I. (1973). Education and politics in India: Studies in organization, society and policy. *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs, 29*(3), 271–273.

Sabharwal, N. S., & Tierney, W. G. (2020). Analyzing the culture of corruption in Indian higher education. In *Corruption in Higher Education, 87*(3), 111-116. https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2016.87.9495

Sabic-El-Rayess, A., & Heyneman, S. P. (2020). Education and corruption. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1637

Sampson, S. (2005). Integrity warriors: Global morality and the anti-corruption movement. In M. Johnston (Ed.), *Public Sector Corruption* (Vol. I, pp. 313-349). SAGE Publications.

Schmidt-Neke, M. (1993). Politisches System. In K. D. Grothusen (Ed.), *Südosteuropa-Handbuch: Albanien* (Vol. VII, pp. 169–242). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-93461-1_20

Schmidt-Neke, M. (2007). Albania. In W. Hörner, H. Döbert, B. von Kopp, & W. Mitter (Eds.), *The Education Systems of Europe* (pp. 11–32). Springer. https://content.e-bookshelf.de/media/reading/L-3827-d38ec027e0.pdf

SECED (2012). *Corruption survey*. [Dataset] Funded by SDC RPP. Higher education corruption survey database for Albania, prepared in the framework of the project Education-Specific Corruption in the Western Balkans (ESCoWeB). Available upon request.

Shahini, A. (2021a). Inequalities in Albanian education: Evidence from large-scale assessment studies. *Kultura i Edukacja*, *134*(4), 40–70. https://doi.org/10.15804/kie.2021.04.03

Shahini, A. (2021b). Sullied: The Albanian student movement of December 1990. *Frontiers in Political Science, 3*, 708881. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.708881

Shahini, A. (2023). *Albania's HE reforms are more about political control than modernisation*. Times Higher Education. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/albanias-he-reforms-are-more-about-political-control-modernisation

Shahini, A. (2024). *Nationalization paradox: Foreign policy and the international dimension of Albanian higher education*. Springer VS.

Su, Y.-S., Gelman, A. E., Hill, J., & Yajima, M. (2011). Multiple imputation with diagnostics (mi) in *R: Opening windows into the black box*. https://www.jstatsoft.org/article/view/v045i02

Sutrisno, A. (2020). Corrupt at all levels? Indonesian higher education and the problem of corruption. In E. Denisova-Schmidt (Ed.), *Corruption in higher education* (p. 132–137). Brill.

Thomas, J. I. (1969). *Education for communism*. Hoover Institution Press.

Transparency International (TI), (2013, 2023). *Albania – Country Report*. https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/albania.

Trines, S. (2017). Academic fraud, corruption, and implications for credential assessment. *World Education News and Reviews*. https://wenr.wes.org/2017/12/academic-fraud-corruption-and-implications-for-credential-assessment

Welch, A. (2020). Of worms and woodpeckers: Governance and corruption in East and Southeast Asian higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 45*(10), 2073–2081. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1823643

Yaroson, E. V., Esew, N. G., & Abdul-Qadir, A. B. (2017). Human capital development in Nigeria: An empirical assessment on the impact of corruption. *African Journal of Economic and Sustainable Development, 6*(1), 86–103.

Zaloznaya, M. (2017). *The politics of bureaucratic corruption in post-transitional Eastern Europe.* Cambridge University Press.

Zamaletdinov, R. R., Yudina, N. P., Lavrentyeva, E. I., Savva, L. I., & Pugacheva, N. B. (2016). Practical recommendations on the improvement of the effectiveness of anti-corruption policy in universities. *International Review of Management and Marketing, 6*(2), 390-396.

Zhllima, E., Imami, D., Rama, K., & Shahini, A. (2018). Corruption in education during socialism and the postsocialist transition: The case of Albania. *Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, 7*(2), 51–70.

Zhuang, M. (2019). Political connections and higher education: Evidence from China's economic liberalization. *Economics of Transition and Institutional Change, 27*(1), 67–97. https://doi.org/10.1111/ecot.12157

Arjan Shahini holds a PhD from the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg. He graduated from the University of Missouri, USA, and the University of Heidelberg, Germany. He is an independent researcher on the history of Albanian higher education, social movements, and large-scale assessment in education.

Edvin Zhllima holds a PhD from the University of Bologna and is a Professor at the Agricultural University of Tirana. Edvin is a researcher and lecturer of development and institutional economics and has conducted research in several fields of study such as resource economics, behaviour economics and gender economics.

Drini Imami holds a PhD from the University of Bologna and is a Professor at the Agricultural University of Tirana. He has conducted research in several leading European research institutions and has contributed to more than 80 scientific journal articles. Research interests include behavioural, political and institutional economics.

Acknowledgements