

POLICY BRIEF

Corruption perceptions at universities of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia: Students' perspectives

Introduction

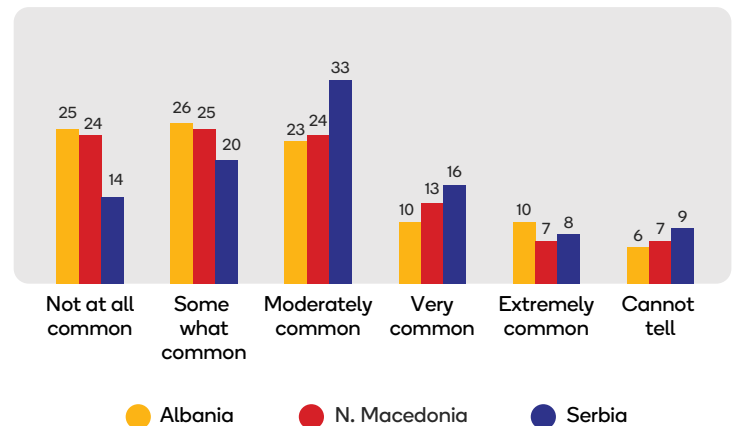
In the period from 2023-2024 the Institute for Strategic Research and Education – ISIE (Skopje) in cooperation with Institute for Development Research and Alternatives - IDRA (Tirana) and Centre for Free Elections and Democracy – CESID (Belgrade) is implementing the regional project “Corruption Free Universities in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia”. The project is aimed at strengthening capacities of universities, student organizations and students for corruption prevention at the higher education institutions (HEIs) in the targeted three countries. Through diverse set of activities including preparation Joint Report on corruption perception, organization of roundtables, capacity building seminars, summer school and development of virtual assistant (chatbot) digital software, the project will boost a corruption prevention enabling environment in the field of higher education in the targeted countries of the Western Balkans.

This Policy Brief presents the key outcomes from the survey of students perceptions carried out in the three countries. Conducted for the first time, the survey has been conducted in over 10 cities using the face-to-face technique in May 2023, on a sample of 943 students in the three countries. More detailed information is available in the national reports that could be accessed on our website www.corruptionfreeuni.com.

Key findings from the survey

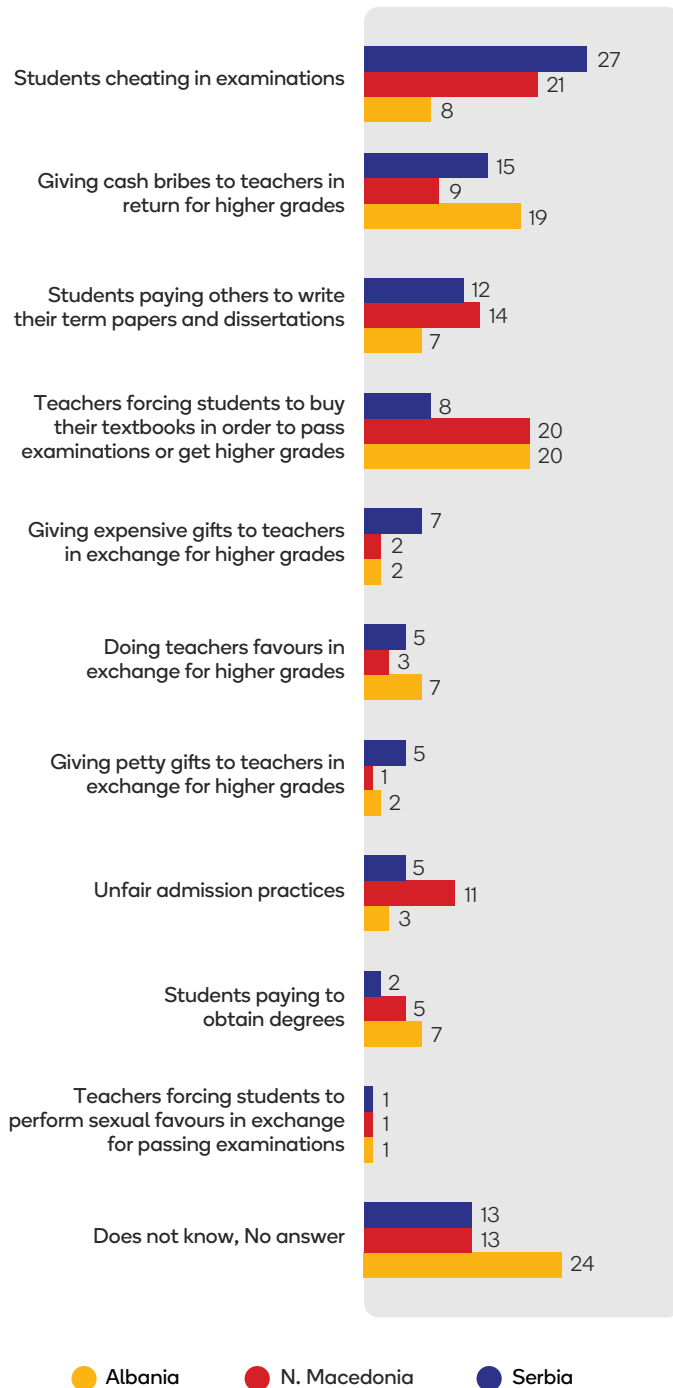
Almost one quarter of respondents from Serbia (24%) saw corruption at their faculties as very or extremely common. One fifth of respondents (20%) from Albania and North Macedonia think that corruption is very or extremely common on their faculties.

Graph 1 - How common is corruption at your faculty? (%)



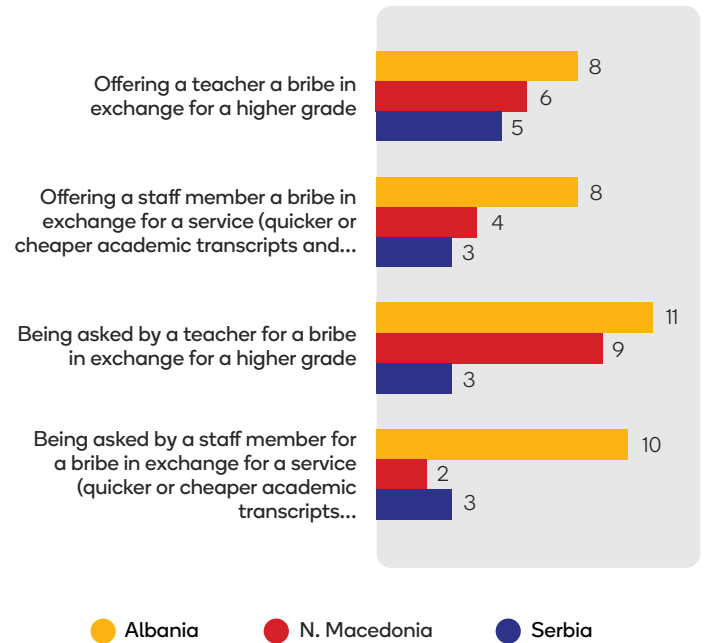
The most common undesirable behaviours at faculties are cheating by students in examinations (Serbia and North Macedonia), teachers force students to buy their textbooks to pass examinations or earn a higher grade (Albania and North Macedonia) and giving money to professors for higher grades (Albania and Serbia). Students from Albania more than other answered that they do not know how to answer.

Graph 2 - What do you feel is the most common form of undesirable behaviour at their faculty? (%)



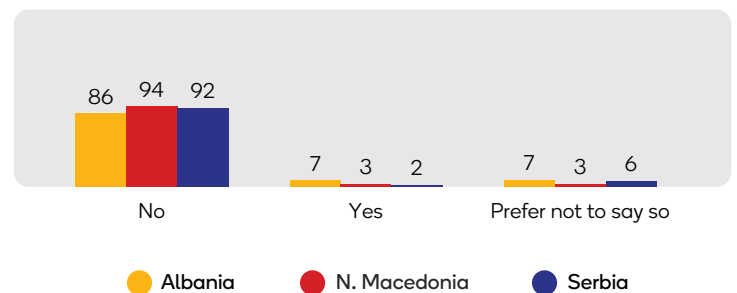
Albanian students more often stated that they have experienced to offer bribe or to be asked for it by professors or faculty staff. As much as one out of 10 students said that they have been asked for a bribe. Respondents from North Macedonia also comparatively more stated that they have been asked by professors to give a bribe (9%).

Graph 3 - Since enrolling at this faculty, have you ever experienced any of the following? ANSWERS: Yes, at least once (%)



The most of the interviewed students have not reported corruption so far. Comparatively, students from Albania have reported these cases more often – 7%.

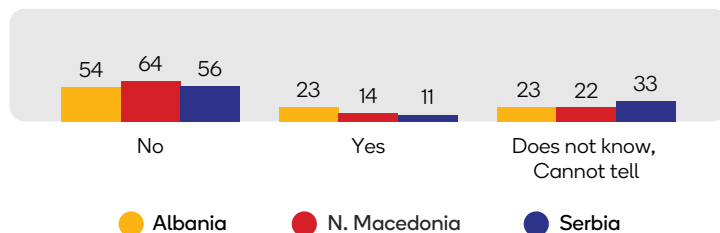
Graph 4 - Have you ever reported a case of corruption to the management of your faculty, either formally or informally? (%)



Most of the respondents said that they either do not know how to answer or that they think there is no an office dedicated to corruption reporting. That is especially related to answers from North Macedonia and Serbia. On the other hand, there is one fifth of respondents from Albania (21%) that are familiar with office that has purpose to receive students' reports of corruption. In Serbia, 57% of respondents states that they cannot tell if there faculty have a dedicated office for reporting corruption.

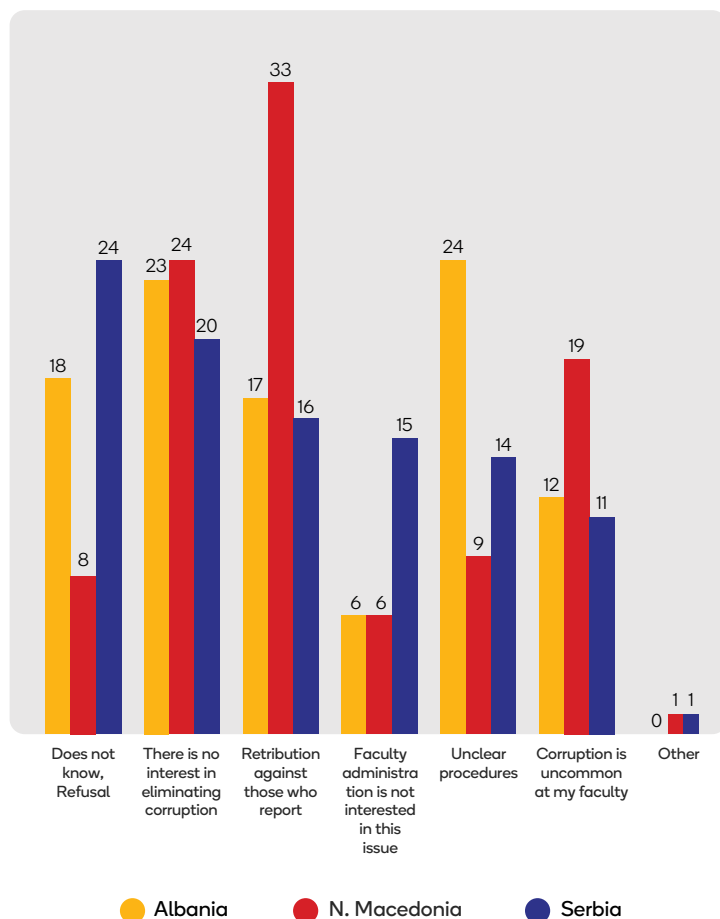
Students from Albania more often answered that they have heard or witnessed a corruption report being ignored or mishandled by the faculty management (23%) in comparison to North Macedonia and Serbia.

Graph 6 - Have you ever heard of or witnessed a corruption report being ignored or mishandled by the faculty management? (%)



Students from Serbian universities more often answered that they are not aware of the procedure for reporting corruption at their faculties at all – as much as 61%. On the other hand, students from Albania are comparatively more aware of procedures for corruption reporting than others.

Graph 10 - What is the main reason why corruption is under-reported at your faculty? (%)



Answers from different countries vary when it comes to main reason why corruption is under-reported. Interviewed students from North Macedonia stated that the reason is retribution against those who report (33%). Students from Albania firstly quoted unclear procedures (24%). Students from Serbia mainly cited deficient interest in eliminating corruption (20%).

Recommendations

ALBANIA

Recommendations on the institutional level (Ministry of Education and Sports) framework

- It is strongly suggested for Ministry of Education and Sports to cooperate with CSOs and other stakeholders, and further exploit the corruption in higher education, identify problems in this sector and develop a more proactive approach towards the prevention of corruption in the HEIS.

Recommendations on the legal framework for Higher Education Institutions

- HEIs are suggested to apply quality management tools, in this specific case the adoption of ISO37001, as a crucial anti-bribery instrument.
- HEIs are strongly suggested to develop their integrity plans as part of their anti-corruption measures. They should develop a risk assessment approach/policy, aiming to identify risks, assess them and develop mitigating measures for each of them.
- HEIs shall develop internal mechanisms to ensure Regulation on Conflicts of Interest and the Regulation on the Protection of Whistle-blowers are implemented. Periodic monitoring on the level of implementation and compliance is crucial to be conducted on regular basis.
- Organisation of informing sessions or awareness raising campaigns may be useful instruments to promote these offices aiming their efficiency.

Recommendations in connection with students' perceptions of corruption

- There is a need to raise awareness on corruption, by organizing various and periodic events for the students, aiming for a better understanding of corrupt practices, and how students can significantly contribute to address them and minimize corruption.
- Development of standard operating procedures on reporting undesirable behaviour is a key element to be strongly considered by HEIs.

- HEIs should take concrete measures to restore the confidence and trust of the students to report corruption practices including periodic informing sessions, introduction of the reporting procedures, presentation of concrete reporting cases etc.
- HEIs are strongly recommended to create a comfortable environment (informing sessions, briefings, organisation of students' forums, introduction of concrete reported cases, etc) for the students and encourage them to report any inappropriate behaviour. Regular online surveys are also suggested.

NORTH MACEDONIA

- Drafting a Handbook on Prevention of Corruption in Higher Education, which will contain all mechanisms for reporting corruption, how to file a report, as well as the authorizations of the competent institutions regarding the reports.
- Hold a training course for students, employees, and student organizations on how to report corruption.
- Create a separate tab on the faculty website which will contain all information and drafted documents with the purpose of prevention of corruption.
- Distinguish corruption reports from whistle-blowers reports by other persons.
- Holding more activities which would contribute to strengthening the HE system, and education with integrity and quality.

SERBIA

1. Raising institutional capacities and improving anti-corruption mechanisms

- Adapt and improve rules regarding non-academic conduct;
- Consider ways of exams that would aim to reduce the use of modern technology for cheating in exams;
- The use of software that recognizes plagiarism works to be introduced into regular application, which would aim to reduce the existence of works that are paid;
- Raise (above all, human) capacities to treat corruption issues at universities;
- Consider the possibility of annual surveys on students' attitudes on the presence of corruption at universities;
- Involve private faculties, with their specifics and different priorities, in the fight against corruption at universities.

2. Adoption, amendment or promotion of legal acts

- Adoption of regulations/rules governing internal procedures for receiving reports from students, professors and other staff about corruption or possible corruption;
- Adoption of rules to make contact details of authorized staff receiving reports of corruption and whistle-blowers publicly available on the faculty's website;
- Preparation of annual plans for the risk assessment of corruption and their public availability;
- Establishing internal regulations/rules to prevent conflicts of interest and regulations on receiving gifts at the faculties.

3. Information, education and campaigns

- Activating bodies/interlocutors (professors, administration, students, student organizations...) dealing with corruption at faculties, through various educational campaigns and workshops to point out potential forms of corruption and how to report corruption at the faculty;
- Organizing education of young people about different types of corruption at universities, how to recognize them, how to report them and how to monitor them;
- Through campaigns encourage students to expose and report corruption in the faculty;
- Establish more active cooperation and networking of students by organizing activities and workshops that would significantly inform students about the rights they have;

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