



SYSTEMIC CRISIS OF INTEGRITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION OF UZBEKISTAN: SOCIO-ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS, DIGITAL VULNERABILITIES, AND GLOBAL REFORM PARADIGMS

Khamzakhonov Sunnatillo Azim ugli
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ABSTRACT

This article is dedicated to an analysis of current issues in combating corruption within the higher education system of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the context of ongoing institutional and legal reforms. The work examines the primary forms and causes of corrupt practices in the educational sphere, including insufficient transparency in management decisions, vulnerabilities in admission procedures, knowledge assessment, and personnel selection, as well as economic and socio-cultural factors contributing to the reproduction of corrupt practices. Particular attention is paid to evaluating the effectiveness of existing anti-corruption mechanisms, including the digitalization of educational processes, regulatory frameworks, and administrative control measures. Based on a comparative analysis of international experience and national practice, the necessity of transitioning to a comprehensive anti-corruption model focused on preventive measures, institutional independence of management, and the formation of a culture of academic integrity is substantiated. The article formulates conclusions and proposals aimed at increasing transparency, accountability, and trust in the higher education system of the Republic of Uzbekistan

Introduction: The Context of Rapid Expansion

The higher education system in Uzbekistan occupies a central place in the implementation of the ambitious "Strategy-2030," aimed at transitioning to a sustainable knowledge-based economy. As the most populous state in Central Asia, Uzbekistan is characterized by a demographic profile with a predominance of youth: approximately 10 million people are aged between 14 and 30 years. This demographic reality has necessitated a rapid expansion of the tertiary education sector: the enrollment rate in higher education institutions rose from 8% in 2017 to 48% by 2024, and the number of universities nearly tripled.

However, this quantitative expansion is occurring within a regulatory environment that continues to struggle with overcoming the legacy of centralized control and systemic corruption[1]. The integrity of the higher education system is currently at a critical juncture, where the persistence of unlawful practices threatens to undermine the quality of human capital and the long-term stability of the state[2].

Corruption Metrics and Current Dynamics

In 2024, Uzbekistan's position in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) demonstrated a concerning regression, worsening for the first time since 2012. The country fell to 121st place out of 180, indicating growing concern at both international and national levels regarding the efficacy of anti-corruption reforms.¹

Data from the Anti-Corruption Agency of the Republic of Uzbekistan indicate that corruption-related crimes are not only persisting but increasing in scale and financial consequences. In 2024, 7,354 individuals were held criminally liable for corruption crimes across 4,649 episodes, representing a 12.5% increase in convicts and a 12.6% increase in the number of crimes compared to the previous year. The education sector remains one of the most affected areas: the number of individuals convicted for corruption-related crimes in this sphere grew from 474 in 2023 to 654 in 2024.²

Metric	2022	2023	2024
Global CPI Rank	126	121	121 (Score drop)
Number of Convicts	5,800	6,535	7,354
Total Corruption Crimes	4,000	4,128	4,649
Total Damage to State (Trillion UZS)	2.04	1.40	2.81
Convicts in Higher Education	N/A	474	654

The material damage caused by these crimes demonstrates a similar upward trend, reaching 2.81 trillion soums (approximately 228.1 million USD) in 2024, compared to 1.4 trillion soums in 2023.³

At first glance, these figures might suggest a fundamental contradiction in Uzbekistan's modernization efforts: despite the government's adoption of progressive measures, such as the implementation of the "Higher Education Management Information System" (HEMIS) and the

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<https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/09/uzbekistans-corruption-crackdown-progress-or-perpetual-crisis/>

³ <https://www.gazeta.uz/en/2025/09/21/corruption/>

creation of the Anti-Corruption Agency, basic mechanisms of unlawful practice have proven resilient, adapting to new digital and institutional frameworks.

However, it is crucial to emphasize that corruption in this sphere was deeply rooted long before the current reforms began. The fundamental difference in the direction of the fight against corruption in higher education before and after 2016 lies in the openness of the current leadership of higher education institutions, as well as law enforcement representatives, to transparency, dialogue, and the disclosure of corruption-related data. Therefore, the decline in CPI positions and the rise in recorded offenses and court cases are not necessarily indicative of a surge in corruption itself, but rather evidence that anti-corruption measures and the detection mechanisms created based on them are functioning at a significantly higher level.

Typology of Corruption Risks

Analysis of anti-corruption legislation, as well as research and the opinions of legal practitioners, point to several critical pain points in the higher education system of the Republic of Uzbekistan, one of them is certainly grade manipulation and scholarship competition: after admission, students encounter a grading system that is often subject to manipulation. Studies by the "Yuksalish" Movement and the Anti-Corruption Laboratory show that 74.4% of respondents believe student assessment depends on external factors.⁴ This practice is frequently driven by competition for scholarships; approximately 28% of respondents indicated that students pressure instructors to change low grades to high ones to maintain or obtain increased scholarship payments. This creates a perverse incentive structure where academic results take a backseat to the financial benefit of inflated grades.

Corrupt activities usually come in a form of:

- **Bribery in Grading:** Direct monetary payments to instructors to ensure a passing grade, a positive evaluation, or inflated results in academic disciplines.

- **"Voluntary" Fees:** Informal payments illegally collected by instructors or administrative staff for services that students are legally entitled to receive without additional cost.

- **Nepotism and Patronage:** Decisions regarding hiring and appointments influenced by family ties or professional favoritism rather than principles of competence and merit.

- **Embezzlement and Procurement Manipulation:** Misuse of budget funds allocated to educational institutions, as well as distortion and falsification of public procurement procedures related to university infrastructure development and maintenance⁵.

Digital Vulnerabilities: The HEMIS System

The HEMIS system, introduced in many higher education institutions and initially designed to minimize contact between students and faculty or administration, has revealed significant flaws. Despite stated goals, HEMIS has faced substantial criticism regarding its technical reliability and the absence of a comprehensive regulatory framework governing its application.

The Anti-Corruption Agency and the "Yuksalish" movement have identified critical vulnerabilities:

⁴ https://www.yumh.uz/en/news_detail/652

⁵ <https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/helpdesk/corruption-in-secondary-and-tertiary-education-in-central-asia>

• **Administrative Override:** A significant risk is the ability of university administration (including deans and rectors) to access instructors' personal accounts and directly alter student grades. This practice undermines the principle of academic autonomy of the faculty and creates a centralized point for mass manipulation of learning outcomes.

• **Lack of Access Controls:** The system currently lacks clearly regulated rules for access segregation and full digital logging of all entered data and interventions. Without a transparent audit trail, identifying the individuals who made specific changes to student records and their motives is significantly impeded.

• **Social Acceptance of Manipulation:** There is a noted low level of resistance from stakeholders—including instructors, students, and their relatives—to grade manipulation, indicating that the technical system operates in an environment where data distortion is effectively perceived as a socially acceptable phenomenon.

Monitoring results as of the end of 2025 indicate that in several educational institutions, key HEMIS modules—including sections ensuring transparency of enrollment procedures and objective assessment of learning outcomes—remain only partially implemented or are not fully functional.

Strategic Recommendations for Reform

To address the aforementioned problems, the following reforms are deemed essential:

1. Reforming Institutional Governance: It is proposed to abandon the model of appointing rectors by the authorized ministry and transition to a system of independent **Boards of Trustees**. These boards would exercise strategic leadership and depoliticized oversight of educational organizations. They must perform fiduciary control functions, protecting academic appointment processes and resource distribution from political or personal interference.

2. Strengthening Digital Integrity: Technical protection mechanisms of the **Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS)** must be reinforced by implementing Role-Based Access Control (RBAC) and Two-Factor Authentication (2FA). A key element should be the mandatory recording of all operations related to grading and administrative interventions in immutable digital logs (blockchain or similar immutable ledgers) that preclude unauthorized alteration by university staff.

3. Formalizing Meritocratic Recruitment: Legislation should mandate competitive hiring procedures for faculty based on standardized assessment criteria, involving selection committees that include independent external experts. This will replace the practice of informal patronage ("*tanish-bilish*") with a transparent recruitment system based on verified scientific and pedagogical achievements.

4. Enhancing Legal Protection for Whistleblowers: A comprehensive system of legal guarantees for whistleblowers must be established, ensuring the ability to report corruption and other unlawful acts without risk of persecution. This system should include anonymous reporting channels as well as material and professional incentives for individuals who assist in exposing systemic abuses.

5. Transition to Independent Accreditation: It is advisable to implement a "triad" model of quality control, combining state regulation with the activities of independent accreditation agencies conducting expert assessments based on a peer-review approach. This creates a system of checks and balances where education quality is evaluated by the

professional academic community rather than solely by centralized government bodies.

Conclusion

The conducted research leads to the conclusion that corruption in the higher education sphere of the Republic of Uzbekistan is systemic and multifactorial, shaped by institutional, economic, and socio-cultural conditions. Despite reforms implemented in recent years aimed at digitizing management processes, expanding the autonomy of educational organizations, and strengthening anti-corruption control, persistent risks remain associated with the concentration of administrative powers, limited transparency in personnel and assessment procedures, and insufficient material support for faculty.

Analysis of existing anti-corruption mechanisms indicates the need to shift from a predominantly formal-punitive approach to a comprehensive preventive model based on institutional guarantees of management independence, the development of meritocratic recruitment principles, and the introduction of effective digital control tools. Of particular importance is the formation of a sustainable culture of academic integrity, implying the active participation of students and faculty in ensuring the transparency of the educational process. Successful combat against corruption in the higher education system is possible only through the coordinated application of legal, organizational, and socio-economic measures, as well as the integration of international good governance standards, taking into account the national legal tradition and development priorities of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

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