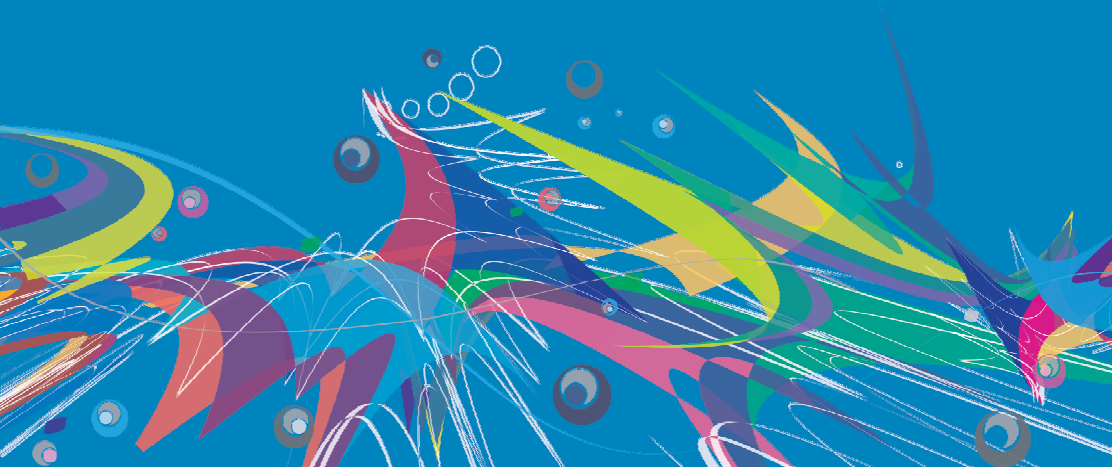


Student Perception on Corruption in the Armenian Higher Education System



**Student Perception on
Corruption in
the Armenian Higher Education
System**

Yerevan
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The report has been prepared by:

Aslanyan Larisa, Yerevan State Linguistic University after V.Brusov

Grigoryan Ariadna, Yerevan State Linguistic University after V.Brusov

Gyumjibashyan Karapet, State Engineering University of Armenia

Hassassian Angela, European Regional Academy

Khachatryan Siranush, Gyumri State Pedagogical Institute

The report has been edited by Mr. Ruben Yeganyan, demographer, PhD in Economy.

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Abbreviations

RAU – Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University

ERA – European Regional Academy

ASUE GB – Armenian State University of Economics, Gyumri
Branch

GSPI – Gyumri State Pedagogical Institute

ASAU – Armenian State Agrarian University

SEUA – State Engineering University of Armenia

YSLU – Yerevan State Linguistic University after V. Brusov

YSU – Yerevan State University

Introduction

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office in Yerevan invited the European Students' Union (ESU) to conduct an assessment of student democracy in Armenia on the occasion of a study visit in 2008.

As a result of this study visit the ESU group developed a series of recommendations to promote the student democracy in Armenia. One of the recommendations in their report was to launch a student campaign against corruption in the higher education system, following successful experience in Romania and Albania.

Fighting against corruption and establishing a knowledge-based economy have been announced to be priorities for the Government of Armenia. Against this background the Office followed the recommendation of the ESU and developed the “Student Campaign to Promote Awareness and Discussion about Corruption in Armenian Universities” project. The project is multifaceted and has various aims:

- To raise awareness and promote discussion on corruption in universities;
- To involve students in the process of promoting transparency and monitoring cases of corruption in universities;
- To mobilize students around the issue of concern to them and to organize anti-corruption campaigns;
- To promote student participation in democratic management of the universities;
- To draw the attention of all stakeholders to negative as well as positive phenomena in the higher education system.

During the project planning and implementation phases the OSCE Office in Yerevan closely cooperated with the experts from the Belgrade Open School student NGO.

The first stage of the project included establishment of the student working group, the first series of trainings and the study trip to Serbia and Albania. It was implemented with the extra budgetary support from the Government of the Federative Republic Germany. Other project activities have been sponsored by the OSCE Office in Yerevan.

The six members of the student working group (four students from Yerevan and two students from Gyumri) were selected based on the applications submitted and individual interviews.

First of all, the student working group had received a package of corresponding constitutional acts, university statutes (only those available), present anticorruption strategies and action plans. Consequently the group received a training in Yerevan, conducted by two Serbian experts sharing hands on experience on the subtleties of organizing anticorruption campaigns, challenges and risks of the organizational process and possible solutions. After the training the group set off for a study trip to Albania, where it participated in the annual reporting meeting of the Anti-Corruption Student Network in South Eastern Europe (ACSN in SEE). After Albania the team visited Serbia, where it had a number of useful meetings with the representatives of the student councils, Serbian experts, NGOs and student unions. At both locations the members of the group learnt about the European experience of battling corruption.

Armed with the knowledge and expertise gained in the course of the trip, the group undertook the program implementation.

The student working group decided to conduct a survey within the framework of the program to gather knowledge on the perception of corruption in the universities among students. The survey also aimed at trying to understand the forms, causes and level of corruption in higher education. Another research objective was to gain knowledge on the perception of corruption among students and their ideas on how to improve the situation; this entailed the data collection

on students' capacity and willingness to monitor and actively fight against corruption at university level. Based on the findings of this research it is planned to promote public discussions after sharing the survey results with the public.

Survey methodology:

First, the survey method was determined: pilot sample observation through anonymous questionnaire. Respective implementation methodology was developed as follows: the main survey group was determined including 1st to 3rd year students of state universities in Yerevan and Gyumri with the general population of individual students and a sample of 1200 students;

- The survey method was identified. Due to lack of resources and time the priority was given to the principle of so-called group interviews (group of respondents is called to a location, in this case it is basically one of the auditoriums; they are explained how to fill-in the questionnaire and individually complete the questionnaire provided to them and hand it back to the interviewer);
- From the number of general population a sample population was selected. For conducting the interviews preference was given not to individual respondents but to certain respondent groups – in this case to segments with specific specialization from this or that university year;
- The main survey tool, i.e. a questionnaire comprising 10 questions was developed and revised after passing expertise of the focus groups consulted by Yerevan and Gyumri students.

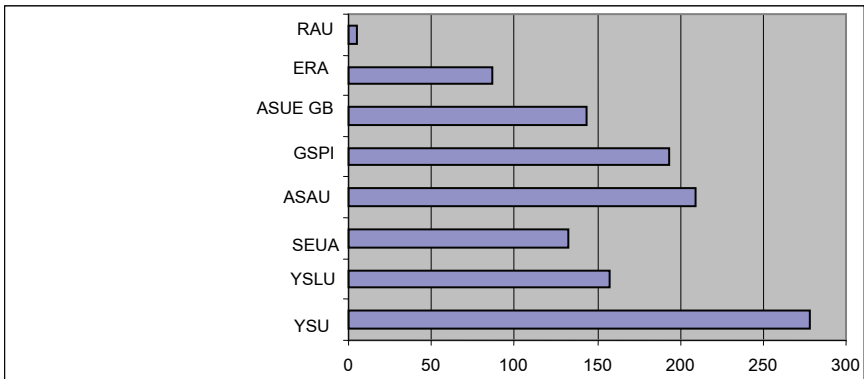
The group members conducted field surveys in Yerevan and Gyumri universities with their own resources during May-June 2010.

The data collection phase was followed by data processing and analysis using SPSS software. The preparation of this report was solely completed with the efforts and resources of the student group.

Structure of the Surveyed Population

The respondents were divided by their specific universities as follows:

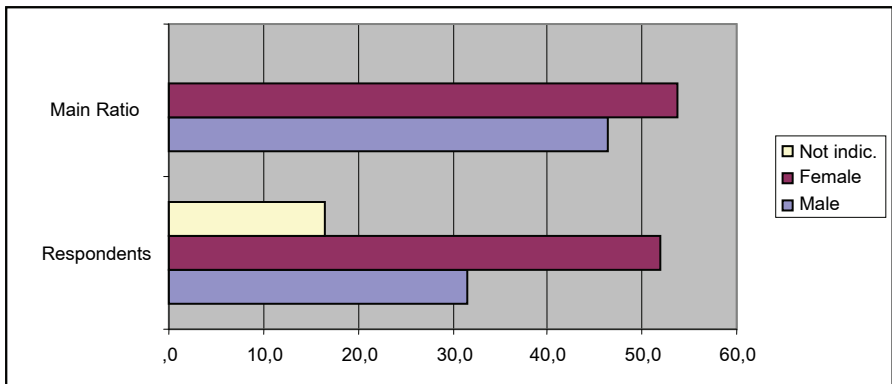
Chart 1. Distribution of respondents by universities



The ratio of male respondents was significantly lower among the respondents making only 31.6% vs. 46.3% of the general population (see Chart 2).

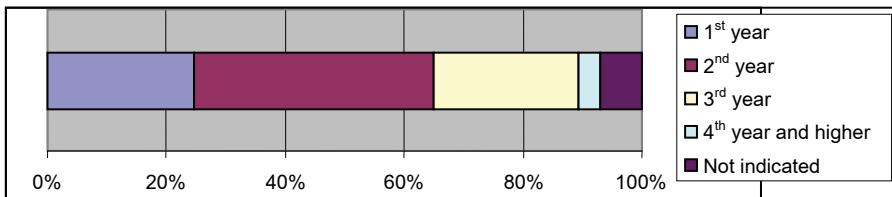
However, given the considerably high ratio of those, who did not indicate their sex - 16.4% and assuming that the ratio of males among them was prevalent (on the assumption that female respondents were reluctant to indicate their sex) one might say that in reality the deviation between females and males is not that remarkable. The difference might also be explained by the absence of mostly male students from classes or their lack of interest in participating in the survey.

Chart 2. Distribution of respondents and general population by gender (% in total)



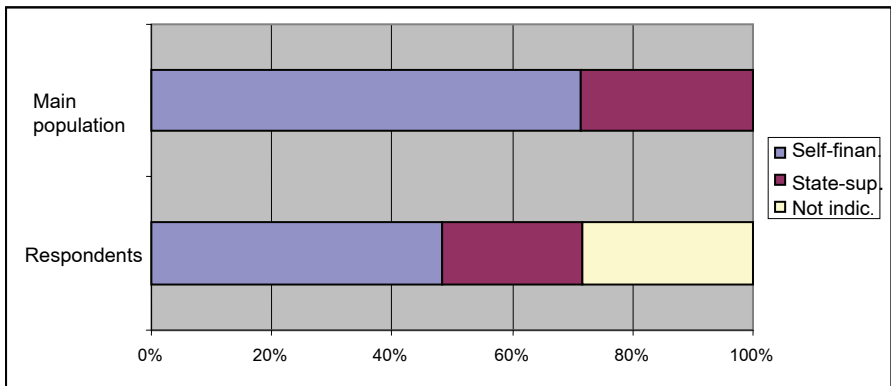
With regard to the distribution according to the study year it is worth mentioning that in the sample population the ratio of those having studied for 4 and more years was minor (only 3.7% of the total).

Chart 3. Distribution of respondents according to the study year (% in total)



This respondents group was included in the survey due to the fact that during the selection process representatives of this group were present as well and expressed willingness to participate. The instructors found it correct to welcome their participation.

Chart 4. Distribution of respondents and main population by self-financed/state-supported study (% in total)

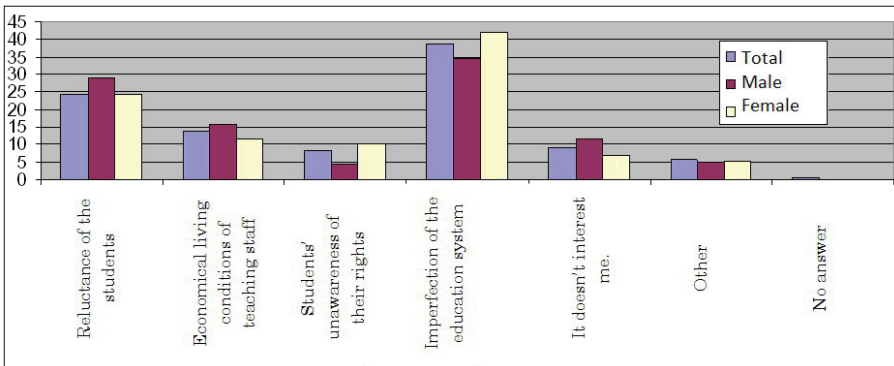


We can note that over 28% of the respondents assumingly due to inattentiveness did not indicate whether their education is self-financed or not. Given this aspect of distribution in the parent population the ratio of paid education students significantly prevails.

Survey Findings

The first question of the questionnaire is aimed at identifying the understanding and perception of the student community in regard to the main reasons of corruption in the universities.

Chart 5. Reasons of corruption prevalence in universities (% of total number of respondents)



According to the data of Chart 5 many of the respondents – almost 40% find that corruption at university level is of systemic nature inherent to the imperfection of the education system.

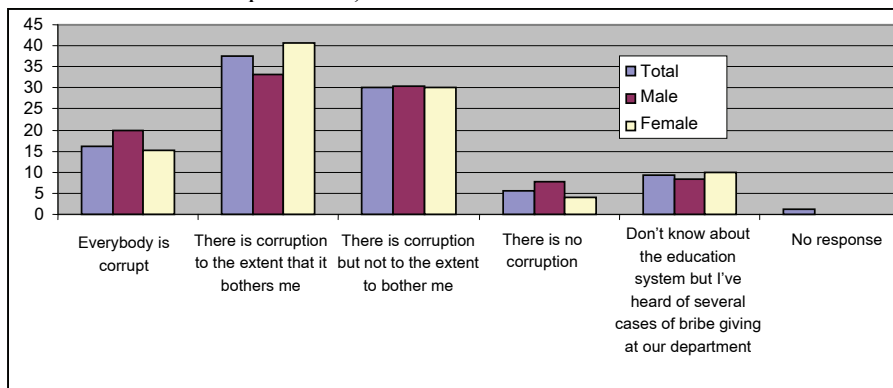
In contrast, the second largest group of respondents – almost every 4th person displays self-criticism stating that the main reason of this phenomenon is laziness of the students themselves. These interesting data prove that the students accept their share of responsibility for corruption, but at the same time are inclined to blame the system rather than themselves.

According to the assessment of respondents the 3rd reason (quoted by almost 14% of respondents) is unfavorable economic living conditions of the university teaching staff. As for the ratio of the other two response options (“Unawareness of students of their rights” and “I am not interested in it”) they respectively constitute 8-9% of the respondents respectively.

It should be also noted that in the frame of this and the following two questions the responses of females and males are practically of the same quality and do not present quantitative differences from the statistical point of view.

The second question of the questionnaire was aimed at gathering data on student assessment of corruption at university level.

Chart 6. Assessment of corruption in higher education system (% of total number of respondents)



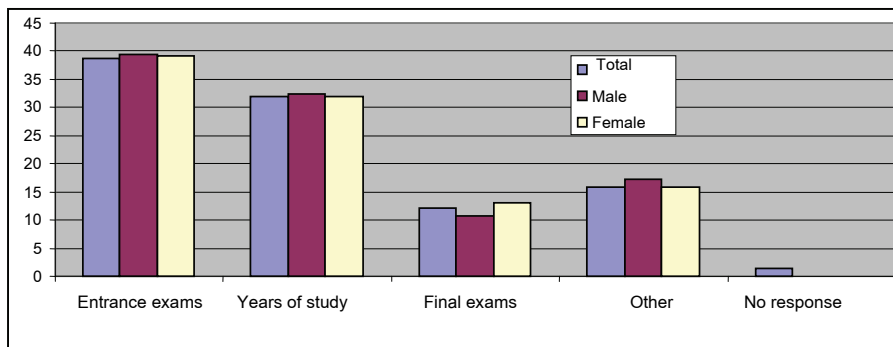
The analysis of the distribution of responses portrayed in Chart 6 provides evidence for recording a high level of corruption within the university system – 68.6%. Only 5.5% of the respondents state that there is no corruption in the system, whereas more than 16% think that practically everybody is involved in this phenomenon.

According to the assessment of a larger group of respondents – almost 4 out of every 10 – the prevalence of corruption is at least annoying. One can assume that this group is not only concerned with the prevalence of this phenomenon, and considers further continuation of this situation as unacceptable and counter measures as necessary, but we might also conclude that this group represents certain resources, readiness and capacity to get involved in anti-corruption struggle.

However, an approximate share of 30% of the respondents considers the corruption phenomenon not widespread enough for feeling uncomfortable.

Distribution of responses on the phase comprising highest corruption risk during the higher education is provided in Chart 7.

Chart 7. Corruption risk assessment by phases of higher education (% in the total number of respondents)



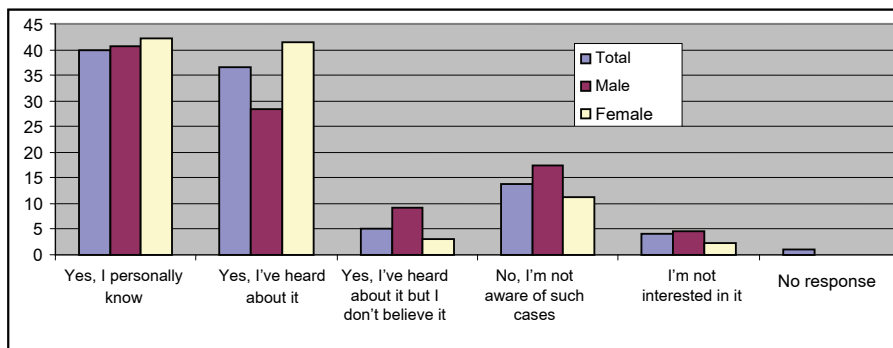
Greater ratio of respondents – about 40%, evaluated the admission exams as a phase comprising higher corruption risk. There is no substantial difference also in the assessment of the education process itself; years of study were evaluated as more risky in terms of corruption by about every 3rd respondent.

On the background of these two assessments the corruption risk of final exams is lower – this phase was assessed as more risky by about 12% of the respondents. However, it should be noted that majority of the respondents did not have a chance to be associated with final exams and have their opinion based on personal experience.

To the question whether they personally know someone who has been involved in corruption, every 4th respondent gave a positive answer (see Chart 8).

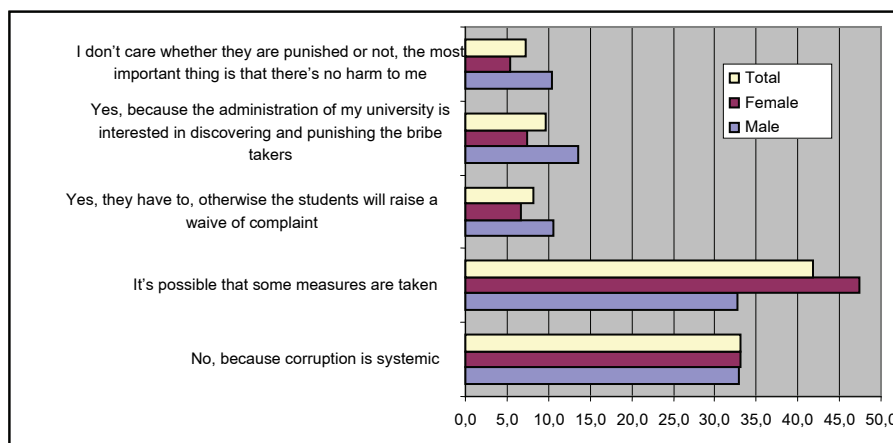
Another 36.5% of respondents were aware of such a fact. If we add to this ratios also those respondents (5.1%) who were aware of corruption case but do not believe it we will conclude that at least 8 out of 10 students have direct or indirect information about corruption cases in the universities (that is **82.2%** of all respondents).

Chart 8. Do you know someone who was involved in corruption (% in the total number of respondents)



Here we should also note that share of females having heard about corruption cases is higher by 13 percentage points than that of males (41.3% and 28.3% respectively). Probably, this can be explained by the so-called “wireless phone” function of females.

Chart 9. Do you believe that in case of discovering a corruption case those being guilty will be punished (% in the total number of respondents)



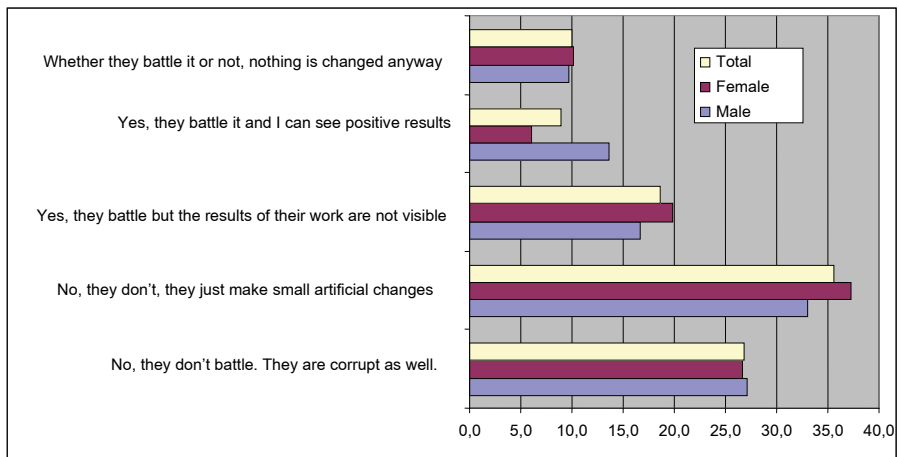
Every 3rd student, considering corruption as a system phenomenon, believes that those involved in the case will not be punished in case of detection (see Chart 9). It is worth mentioning that females and males are completely of the same opinion in this regard.

It is difficult to evaluate it as encouraging when larger share of respondents – more than 40% of total and even 47.4% of females not being sure in unavoidability of punishment just consider it possible that “some measures” may be taken.

Having in mind the aspect that more than 7% of respondents are not interested with the issue of punishing those involved in corruption we can state that only a small share of respondents – 18% thinks that such punishment is unavoidable. It is interesting that females are more optimistic in this regard - 24.1% vs. 14.1% of males.

According to data of Chart 10 about 2/3 of respondents think public authorities either do not fight corruption (about 27%) or they just pretend to fight (almost 36%). Only 27.6% of respondents believe that there is such action and only every 3rd of them thinks that this action is effective.

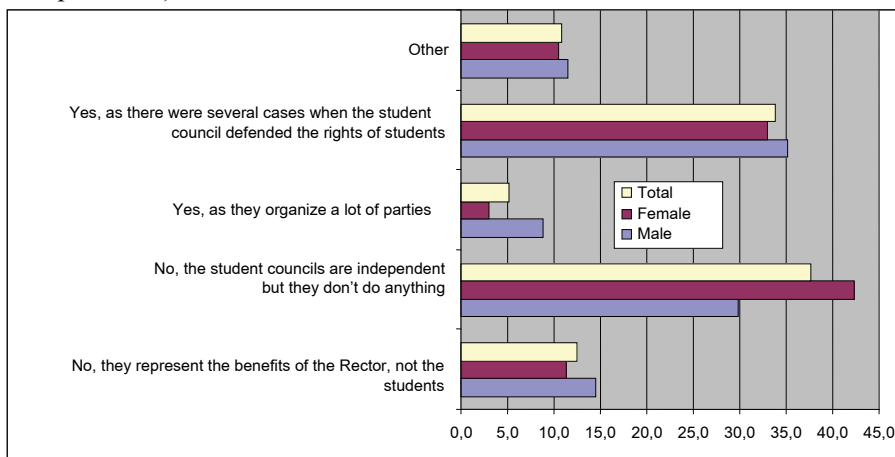
Chart 10. Do you think state authorities fight against corruption? (% in the total number of respondents)



It should be noted that here the only gender specificity is again higher optimism of females as opposed to males – in contrast to 6% of males almost 14% of females feels the effects of fight against corruption by state authorities.

Based on data of Chart 11 more than 50% of respondents do not have trust towards student councils. Those who do not trust (almost 38% of respondents) explain it with the fact that even though the councils are independent they are not conducting serious positive activities and are formal structures. As a noteworthy fact we should state that the ratio of those having such opinion could be considerably smaller if more than 42% of females did not “vote” for this fact in contrast to about 30% of males.

Chart 11. Do you trust student councils? (% in the total number of respondents)

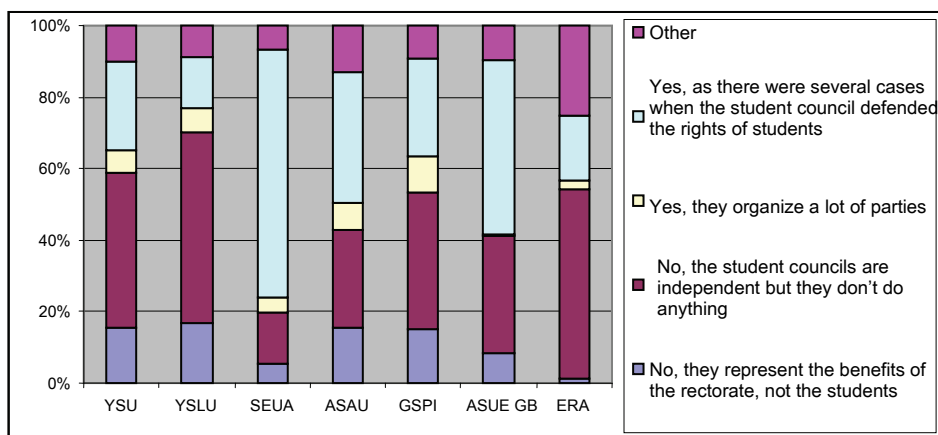


12.5% of respondents do not trust the student councils as they think that they are dependant from university administration.

Only 4 out of 10 respondents voted for student councils; one aspect might be considered encouraging since majority of the latter voted based on the consideration of specific cases of protecting students’ interests. A vivid example of such activity is the Student Council of State Engineering University of Armenia, which actively publicizes its

activities through different internet resources resulting on the highest rating of the student councils among the respondent students (7.9%).

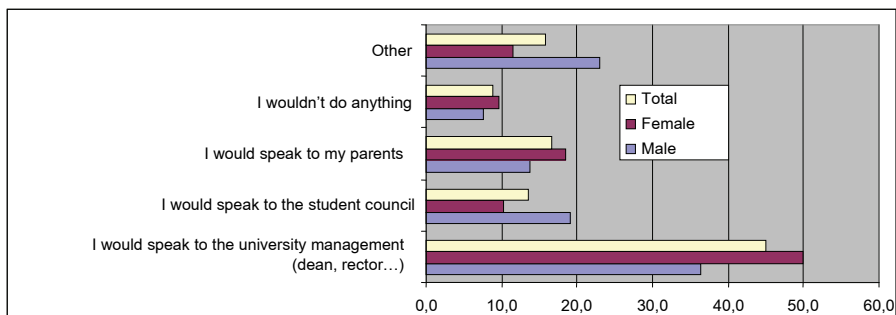
Chart 12. The distribution of responses by universities to the question: “Do you trust student councils?” (% in the total number of respondents by separate universities)



The results of the Chart 12 give a basis to state that the opinion about the student councils being effective or not directly depends on the efficiency of their work including their achievements in terms of ongoing information sharing with the students. As an additional proof one can name the Student Council of the SEUA which ensures the information flow to the students through various means of internet resources. The SEUA Student Council has the highest credibility among the students of that university - 76% - as compared to 20.7-49.5% of the student councils of other universities.

As an additional proof of lack of trust towards student councils may serve the aspect that in case of violation of rights less than 14% of respondents will apply to student councils for help (see Chart 12).

Chart 13. What will you do if your rights are violated (% in the total number of respondents)

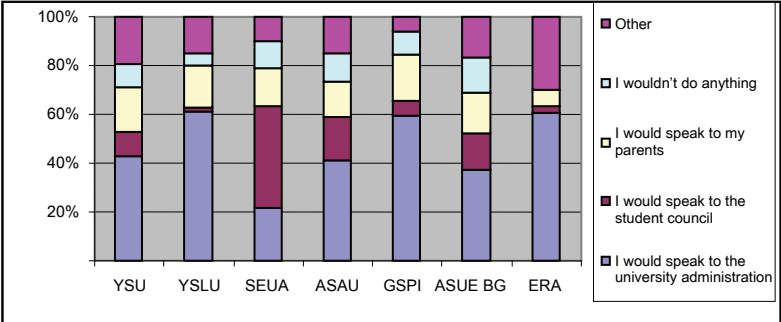


Given lower trust towards student councils among females it is more than typical that the share of males having provided such answer is twice as smaller in comparison with females.

As opposed to this, the ratio of females opt to apply to the university administration in such cases is significantly bigger – 50% vs. 36.4% of males. Among the surveyed universities the highest rating has the SEUA and the GSPI (9.6% and 9.5% respectively).

We think that it should be at least bothersome that a significant share of students receiving higher education, who are at least theoretically organized and sufficiently informed (about 17%) will rely only on their parents and about 9% will not do anything and will learn to live with it.

Chart 14. Distribution by universities according to responses to the question “What would you do in case of violation of your rights?” (% among the total respondents from the given university)



Referring to the data of Chart 14 we should note that once again they prove that the Student Councils have significant resources in case of effective and consistent work but at present this is used to insignificant extent. As a proof to the above-mentioned we can refer to the fact that more than 4 out of 10 respondents from the SEUA having a more effective Student Council will rely on it first than in other universities where one might conclude that Student Councils are less effective, only 15-18% of respondents indicated that they would rely on this structure for the protection of their interests (in YSLU and ERA this ratio is even 1-2%). Here we should note that most likely not only individuals directly involved there or administration of universities but generally all the students have their say in this situation.

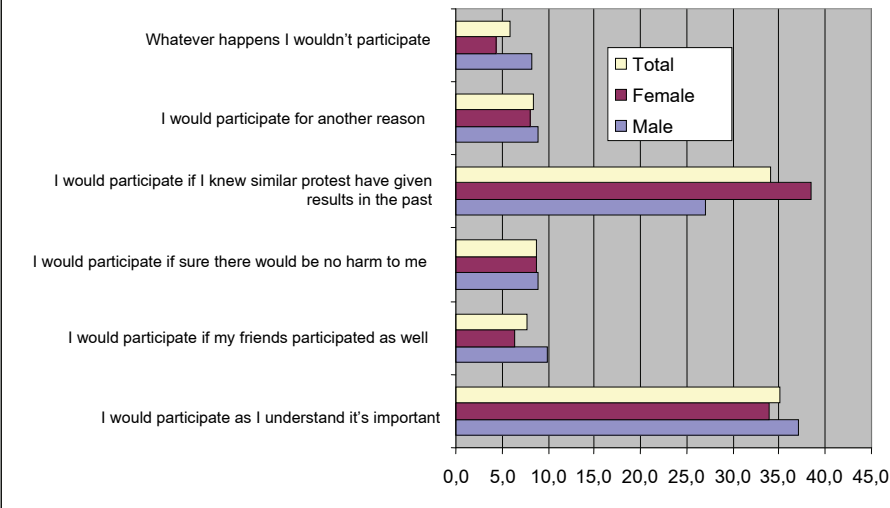
The question one from the bottom is aimed to determine to what extent the students are ready to participate in mass events – in this case in protest actions – organized in support of protection of student interests. According to data of Chart 13 only an insignificant share of respondents – about 6% of the total, including 8.3% females and only 4.4% males – would not participate in such events regardless of everything.

The ratio of other respondents is distributed almost equally – more than 1/3, but in their quality they differ significantly.

One group comprises those who understand the importance of the issue.

The second group comprises those having the so-called more pragmatic approach – the respondents would participate only if they had specific guarantees that they would achieve their goal.

Chart 15. If the students of your university organize a protest action to protect the interests of students, in what circumstances would you participate? (% among the total number of responses)



It is interesting, though perhaps not a surprise, that if the share of “reasonable” males and females is almost equal than the share of “pragmatics” is significantly bigger for females – almost 40% of the total vs. 27% of males.

3 more groups having almost the same ratio (9-10% of the total for each group) condition their participation with the participation of their friends or impunity or with other factors.

We can conclude that there is a group of more active students fighting for their interests (35.2% of respondents) and depending on their success general activism of students might significantly increase.

To the 10th open question “What would you like to change in the Armenian education system? What would you advise to the Ministry of Education and Science?” the respondents provided different answers and recommendations, including making admission exams stricter and better, giving up Bologna reforms and returning to the former education system, maximally implementing Bologna reforms program, implementing significant reforms in education system and administration (including staff), providing better access to internet in universities, having more specialized exams during the entry process, improving school education quality, increasing scholarships, changing and updating the curriculum, being fair, etc. Significant share of respondents is pessimistic answering “Even if I offer anything nothing is going to be changed”. Concluding we would like to note that responses of state-supported and self-financed education students, assessments of different academic year students do not principally differ; there are only non-significant quantitative deviations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Concluding the findings of the survey we can say with satisfaction that we achieved our goals – we revealed the perception of students on corruption in universities, we understood the opinions of the students about the reasons of prevalence of corruption and about possible ways of decreasing the number of corruption cases in universities as well as we revealed the extent to which Armenian students are willing to protect their rights and to battle corruption with their own forces.

Based on the results of the completed survey the student working group can conclude that within the sphere of Armenian students there exists a universal mistrust towards the educational structure, which is a result of the lack of a successful precedent, a success story. The survey also showed that the majority of students want to play an active role in building a future for themselves, but they don't know how to do it, and if there were motivating forces they would be able to productively protect their rights.

The survey results also showed that students are quite aware of their rights, but there isn't a representative body that would first and foremost show positive results in the sphere of the protection of student rights and interests, making the positive solutions noticeable at least only to the university society. These will be the precedents so anticipated for by the student body. It's important to note that the team doesn't mean singular incidents (which, for sure, occur in any given university), rather the systematical solving of the issue, and unprecedented protection of student rights. In order to realize all of this the students must firstly, to the best of their ability, be informed and united.

Recommendations

1. Taking into account the experiences of SEUA Student Council, which has gained positive feedback from a large group of students regarding its actions, compared to other university student councils, the working group encourages

other student councils to follow their example and work more in the sphere of public relations (PR). The working group members believe this is vital because the student councils are indeed working to make university life better for students in many different ways, but unfortunately their efforts remain unknown to the general public. The group recommends starting up a student council website, a Facebook page, a message board, or using other means such as newsletters or a bulletin board within the university, which can be accessed by all students and is frequently updated with news and events and other student council operations. This will promote transparency and help keep students informed of what the student council is doing, thereby gaining student trust.

2. The student working group believes that students should actively seek out information regarding what the student council has to offer them, and what activities the student council is involved in and organizing. The survey results have shown that about 35% of students know of situations where their student council has worked to protect the rights of students (see Chart 11).
3. The student working group would like to advise the lecturers and professors to follow the model of the western countries and to create an updated program of the course to be approved by the academic council. The approved program must be available to all the students of the university through the website or the library. According to the standards of the Bologna reforms, there must be a list of compulsory and facultative classes. A number of students mentioned in their advice to the Ministry of Education and Science that they would like to have more freedom when choosing a course as they would learn with greater pleasure what they are interested in rather than something they are forced to by the university management.
4. The team thinks that all the lecturers and professors need to be evaluated periodically and the results of the evaluation need to

be shared both with the faculty and the students to guarantee the transparency.

5. The government has initiated new efforts to fight against corruption in higher education system, which is encouraging. The working group hopes more students will be involved in the project implementation process.
6. A huge number of students raised the issue of creating an independent and impartial center which would not only arm the students with information but would also help them with fighting against corruption through providing consultancy services, like the Obmudsman does, for example. The students want to have somebody who would protect their rights instead of them but the working group thinks that the students must learn and realize that nobody can protect their rights instead of them. A center like that can provide them with the necessary information; can only help them to stand for their rights. The students themselves have to be the creators of their own future.

Follow up activities

7. The student group plans to create a student blog aimed at raising awareness on corruption in higher education. It is planned to invite students to join the discussions, sharing of news, stories, and experiences, raising questions and working together with the team in this direction. The student working group also plans to create a website and an official Facebook page.
8. The student working group intends to collect the statutes and charters of all the universities and make them available to the students through uploading them on the official website. The group intends to raise awareness through organizing events, through disseminating information via internet sources and traditional means making information available to all those who are interested in it. The students have to be aware of the clauses of their university statute, have to know about their

rights and responsibilities as well as about the functions and responsibilities of the student councils.

The issue of eliminating corruption should be tackled by both edges of the system – students and the government. Both sides should be interested to be fully involved in this process. One should encourage the other and at the same time they should monitor and control the work of one another. This is the only way to be successful and efficient when fighting against corruption in universities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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