To Buy or Not to Buy? Investing in a Dissertation in Ukraine

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Abstract
In addition to widespread and globalized academic essay mills, doctoral degree fraud is becoming an issue. In Ukraine, dozens of firms offer ghostwritten dissertations for sale. Aspirant doctorate holders face the dilemma: to buy, or not to buy, a ghostwritten dissertation. Despite the mounting costs of a doctorate, it is a union card that brings job security and snowballing benefits in large increments to those who decide to invest in a ghostwritten dissertation.

Many lower-middle-income nations, including Communist and post-Communist regimes, have been undergoing market transition for decades. In many instances, despite the lengthy period of transformation, the market reforms undertaken by different political regimes can hardly be called successful. Largely monopolized, semifeudal, to a significant extent illicit, and highly corrupt national economies do not feature well-developed and competitive markets. Nevertheless, there is one market that is a clear exception because of the unusual product—doctoral dissertations. Those who use this product undermine national economies due to a lack of developed skills. Available for sale, doctoral degrees no longer signal expertise. On the international market, it is not clear what the degree holders are worth. The problem of ghostwritten dissertations has become a global concern.

Ukraine Advances in Ghostwritten Dissertations

My decade-old study, "Economics of Corruption in Doctoral Education: The Dissertations Market," published by *Economics of Education Review*, found 169 firms in Russia that produce ghostwritten dissertations. Ukraine had only 16 such firms at the time. My more recent study, "Let Me Write a Dissertation for You: The micro-level cost-benefit approach to doctoral degree fraud," which appeared in *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, found 46 firms that offer ghostwritten dissertations for sale in Ukraine. In addition, there are numerous individual scholars—freelancers of a kind—eager to write a dissertation for a reasonable fee. These firms and individuals represent the supply side of the dissertations-for-sale market. One can order a dissertation in any field on the topic of one's choice. The demand for these services comes largely from aspiring doctoral candidates, faculty members, and administrators already employed at colleges and universities, practicing physicians, civil servants, politicians, and businessmen. While businessmen are interested in doctorates for prestige and reputation, other potential clients have clearly economic reasons.

Moral and Ethical Considerations Aside

Results of my fieldwork conducted in Ukraine show that ethical considerations and matters of professional conduct play little, if any, role in such decisions. To the contrary, monetary matters dominate decision-making. Buying a dissertation as a long-term investment is attractive to potential clients aspiring to a doctorate. They have to consider the opportunity costs of being involved in teaching and research in academia to earn a doctorate legitimately, even though a doctoral degree produces some benefits in the long-term. Unless one works for a higher education or research institution, is a medical professional or a civil servant, occupies a public office, serves in the military or in a law enforcement agency, or plans a career as a politician, any benefit from holding a doctorate is doubtful. The private sector, including large, medium, and small businesses, does not give much weight to the doctoral degrees of its employees and business owners. Thus, doctoral degree fraud is closely tied to the public sector.

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The Mounting Costs of a Doctorate

Ukraine still has a two-tier system of doctoral degrees, with a first level, *kandidat nauk*, and a higher level, *doktor nauk*. Although the former was recently renamed "PhD" in reference to the Western degree, in essence the system remains virtually intact. Arriving at a doctorate requires producing and defending a dissertation. Preparation and publication of scholarly works is required as well. All of these requirements are available for

sale. The total cost of dissertation, scholarly works, and positive references and reviews for a *kandidat nauk* would cost around US$5,000. This is based on averages of minimum (basic) prices posted by the firms. The maximum price for this package is around US$19,000, almost four times the average basic price. For a *doktor nauk* degree, prices are much higher. The total cost of dissertation, scholarly works, and positive references and reviews would cost around US$25,000. The maximum price reaches US$82,000. Since *kandidat nauk* is a necessary prerequisite for *doktor nauk* degree, the latter results in a maximum price of over US$100,000. These high prices are both unaffordable for most and unreasonable. Indeed, who would want to spend a minimum of US$5,000 for a *kandidat nauk* degree in an academic system where an associate professor at a typical public university has to survive on a meager US$300 a month or even less? Nevertheless, the significant increase in the number of providers—from 16 to 46—may be an indication of increased demand for doctorates.

In addition to the costs listed above, there are other costs, including those that are sometimes referred to as the direct costs of corruption. It is not unusual for doctoral candidates, especially those buying ghostwritten dissertations, to bribe members of their doctoral committee in exchange for admission to the defense and positive votes. In addition, lavish banquets and gifts are considered as natural parts of this corrupt tradition. Finally, costs also include paperwork. In anticipation of the dissertation defense and conferral of a doctoral degree, a required set of documents must be submitted to the ministry of education and science. These documents can also be prepared for a fee by specialists closely affiliated to those who offer ghostwritten dissertations for sale. In addition, there are numerous other, less significant, expenses. These expenses drive the cost of the degree even higher than the average price used in the initial cost-benefit analysis.

It Pays Back to Have a Doctorate

Still, benefits can justify the costs. Holders of doctoral degrees are entitled to a significantly higher pay, in both public and private colleges and universities as well as in public offices. Benefits also include higher positions in academic or bureaucratic hierarchies and receiving higher retirement pay. Job security is also a consideration. To put it bluntly, a doctorate is a union card that offers security and snowballing benefits in large increments. Furthermore, in a corrupt country such as Ukraine, faculty and state bureaucrats generate illicit income in the form of bribes to supplement their legal pay. Quite frequently, this illicit income may exceed formal pay. The seniority that results from a doctorate may also promise a higher level of illicit income and expand opportunities for corruption. ◢

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