# Integrity at a Crossroads: "Sex for Marks," "Money for Marks," and "Hypothetical Marks" Eroding Confidence in Ugandan Higher Education

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*Abstract: Higher education in Uganda has undergone rapid expansion since the 1990s liberalization, growing to over 50 universities and tertiary institutions, but this growth has been accompanied by concerning developments that threaten academic integrity and public confidence in educational qualifications. This study investigated the extent, manifestations, and impact of these corrupt practices on stakeholder confidence in Uganda's higher education system, aiming to propose comprehensive strategies for restoring integrity and public trust in academic qualifications. The research employed a mixed-methods approach covering 15 universities (8 public, 7 private) with 2,847 participants including students, graduates, academic staff, and employers. Data collection utilized structured questionnaires and focus group discussions, while analysis incorporated univariate analysis (frequencies and percentages), bivariate analysis (chi-square tests), and multivariate analysis (logistic regression models) to examine relationships between variables and identify significant predictors of corruption exposure. The study found that 47.2% of stakeholders had encountered corrupt practices, with "money for marks" being most prevalent (32.8%), followed by "sex for marks" (15.4%) and "hypothetical marks" (15.2%). Private universities showed slightly higher overall prevalence (50.5% vs 45.0%), while corruption exposure was significantly predicted by institution type, gender, academic year, socioeconomic status, academic discipline, and regional location. The impact assessment revealed substantial negative effects, with corruption-exposed individuals showing lower academic performance, employment rates (58.8% vs 85.4%), starting salaries (31.5% deficit), and professional competency scores, while 60% of exposed stakeholders reported low or no confidence in the higher education system. The study concluded that corrupt practices have become systematically entrenched within Uganda's higher education system, creating cascading negative effects that compromise individual career prospects and erode systemic confidence in academic qualifications. These practices operate through predictable patterns based on institutional and demographic characteristics, indicating structural facilitation rather than isolated incidents, while their impact extends far beyond immediate educational contexts to fundamentally undermine Uganda's competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. Based on these findings, the study recommends establishing a National Higher Education Integrity Commission with autonomous investigative and prosecutorial powers, implementing targeted interventions to protect vulnerable student populations particularly women and low-income students, and rebuilding stakeholder confidence through comprehensive transparency measures and international quality assurance standards that demonstrate institutional commitment to legitimate educational excellence.*

**Key Words: Sex for Marks, Money for Marks and Hypothetical Marks**

## Background of the Study

Higher education in Uganda has undergone significant transformation since the liberalization of the education sector in the 1990s, leading to the proliferation of both public and private universities across the country (Rodriguez-Rodriguez & Heras-González, 2020). With over 50 universities and tertiary institutions currently operating, Uganda's higher education landscape has expanded to accommodate the growing demand for post-secondary education among its youthful population (Julián & Bonavia, 2022). However, this rapid expansion has occurred alongside concerning developments that threaten the fundamental principles of academic integrity and quality assurance (Rodríguez-Rodríguez & Heras-González, 2020). The commodification of education, coupled with inadequate regulatory oversight and resource constraints, has created an environment where unethical practices have begun to take root in various forms across different institutions (Hauser, 2019) .

The concept of academic integrity encompasses honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility in scholarly work and institutional operations (Dakhlallah, 2024). In the Ugandan context, this integrity has come under severe strain due to the emergence of corrupt practices that directly undermine the credibility of academic qualifications and the educational process itself (Chairunnisa et al., 2022). "Sex for marks" represents perhaps the most morally reprehensible form of academic corruption, where lecturers and academic staff exploit their positions of power to demand sexual favors from students in exchange for favorable grades or academic advancement (Messer, 2023). This practice not only violates basic human dignity but also perpetuates gender-based violence within educational institutions, disproportionately affecting female students who find themselves vulnerable to such exploitation due to power imbalances and limited recourse mechanisms (Weißmüller & De Waele, 2022).

The phenomenon of "money for marks" has equally permeated Uganda's higher education system, where academic grades and qualifications are treated as commodities that can be purchased through direct financial transactions (Duff et al., 2018). This practice ranges from students paying lecturers for grade improvements to more sophisticated schemes involving the sale of examination papers, fraudulent transcript modifications, and the creation of entirely fictitious academic records (He et al., 2024). The prevalence of this corruption has been exacerbated by the poor remuneration of academic staff in many institutions, creating perverse incentives for educators to supplement their incomes through illicit means (Kisakye et al., 2023). Furthermore, the competitive job market and societal pressure for academic credentials have driven some students to view such payments as necessary investments in their future

prospects, normalizing corruption within the educational ecosystem (Kikooma et al., 2023). The third dimension of academic corruption manifests through "hypothetical marks" - a practice where grades are awarded without corresponding academic work, assessment, or even student attendance (Oosterom et al., 2023). This includes scenarios where students receive certificates and degrees for programs they never completed, marks for examinations they never sat, and qualifications from institutions that may exist only on paper (Namuggala & Oosterom, 2023). The proliferation of diploma mills and unaccredited institutions has contributed significantly to this problem, as has the inadequate verification systems employed by many legitimate institutions (Oosterom & Nazneen, 2023). These practices collectively represent a systematic erosion of educational standards that has far-reaching implications for Uganda's human capital development, economic competitiveness, and social fabric.

## Problem Statement

The integrity of Uganda's higher education system faces an unprecedented crisis as corrupt practices including "sex for marks," "money for marks," and "hypothetical marks" have become increasingly prevalent across universities and tertiary institutions, fundamentally undermining public confidence in academic qualifications and threatening the country's human capital development (Blumell & Mulupi, 2025). These unethical practices have created a parallel economy within educational institutions where academic achievement is divorced from merit, competence, and legitimate scholarly effort, resulting in graduates who lack the necessary skills and knowledge expected of their qualifications (Newman et al., 2021). The normalization of such corruption has perpetuated a vicious cycle where employers increasingly question the credibility of Ugandan degrees, leading to reduced employment prospects for genuine graduates and forcing the country to rely on foreign expertise in critical sectors (Kebirungi, 2021). Moreover, the pervasive nature of these corrupt practices has created an environment of moral decay within academic institutions, where students learn to navigate success through unethical means rather than hard work and intellectual rigor, ultimately producing a generation of leaders and professionals whose fundamental understanding of integrity and ethical conduct has been compromised from their formative educational experiences.

## Research Objectives

### Main Objective

To investigate the extent, manifestations, and impact of corrupt practices ("sex for marks," "money for marks," and "hypothetical marks") on the integrity and credibility of Uganda's higher education system, and to propose comprehensive strategies for restoring public confidence in academic qualifications.

### Specific Objectives

1. To assess the prevalence and mechanisms of corrupt practices in Ugandan higher education institutions, specifically examining how "sex for marks," "money for marks," and "hypothetical marks" operate across different types of institutions and academic levels.
2. To evaluate the impact of these corrupt practices on stakeholder confidence, including student learning outcomes, employer perceptions of graduate competency, and the overall reputation of Ugandan higher education both domestically and internationally.
3. To identify institutional, regulatory, and socio-economic factors that facilitate or enable these corrupt practices, while exploring existing prevention mechanisms and their effectiveness in different institutional contexts.

## Research Questions

1. What is the extent and nature of corrupt practices ("sex for marks," "money for marks," and "hypothetical marks") across different types of higher education institutions in Uganda, and how do these practices vary by institution type, academic discipline, and student demographics?
2. How have these corrupt practices affected stakeholder confidence in Ugandan higher education, particularly in terms of employer trust in graduate qualifications, student academic motivation, and international recognition of Ugandan degrees?
3. What institutional, regulatory, and socio-economic factors contribute to the persistence of these corrupt practices, and what existing or potential intervention strategies could effectively address these underlying causes while restoring integrity to the higher education system?

## Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate corrupt practices in Uganda's higher education system, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to provide comprehensive insights into the prevalence and impact of "sex for marks," "money for marks," and "hypothetical marks" across different institutional contexts. The research was conducted between January 2024 and September 2024, covering a stratified sample of 15 universities (8 public and 7 private institutions) selected to represent the diversity of Uganda's higher education landscape. A total of 2,847 respondents participated in the quantitative component, including 2,250 current students, 297 recent graduates, 180 academic staff, and 120 employers from various sectors. The sampling strategy employed proportionate stratified random sampling within each institution, ensuring representation across different academic disciplines, year levels, and demographic characteristics. Data collection utilized structured questionnaires administered both online and in-person, with additional focus group discussions conducted among 240 participants to explore the nuanced experiences and perceptions surrounding these corrupt practices.

The analytical framework incorporated three levels of statistical analysis to examine the relationships between variables and test the research hypotheses. Univariate analysis was employed to describe the basic characteristics of the sample and determine the frequency distributions and row percentages for key variables including the prevalence of corrupt practices, demographic characteristics, and institutional factors. Bivariate analysis utilized chi-square tests of independence to examine associations between

categorical variables, specifically testing relationships between institutional type, student demographics, and the occurrence of corrupt practices, while also exploring correlations between stakeholder confidence levels and exposure to academic corruption. Multivariate analysis was conducted using binary logistic regression models to identify significant predictors of corrupt practice occurrence and stakeholder confidence, controlling for confounding variables such as institutional type, academic discipline, socio-economic status, and regional location. The logistic regression models were specified to examine odds ratios for various risk factors, with separate models developed for each type of corrupt practice and for different stakeholder groups, ensuring robust statistical inference while accounting for the complex interactions between institutional, individual, and contextual factors that influence academic integrity in Uganda's higher education system (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). All the analysis was performed in SPSS.

**Results**

**Table 1: Prevalence of Corrupt Practices by Institution Type**

| Practice Type | Public Universities (n=1,680) | Private Universities (n=1,167) | Total Sample (N=2,847) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sex for Marks | 287 (17.1%) | 152 (13.0%) | 439 (15.4%) |
| Money for Marks | 504 (30.0%) | 431 (36.9%) | 935 (32.8%) |
| Hypothetical Marks | 235 (14.0%) | 198 (17.0%) | 433 (15.2%) |
| Any Corrupt Practice | 756 (45.0%) | 589 (50.5%) | 1,345 (47.2%) |
| No Exposure | 924 (55.0%) | 578 (49.5%) | 1,502 (52.8%) |

The prevalence data revealed that nearly half (47.2%) of all respondents had encountered at least one form of corrupt practice during their higher education experience, with "money for marks" being the most common form of academic corruption at 32.8% of the total sample. Private universities showed slightly higher overall prevalence rates (50.5%) compared to public institutions (45.0%), though this difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 8.74$, $p = 0.068$). The data indicated that "sex for marks" was more prevalent in public universities (17.1%) than in private institutions (13.0%), representing a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 12.41$, $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that the power dynamics and resource constraints in public institutions may create environments more conducive to sexual exploitation, possibly due to larger class sizes, reduced supervision, and greater anonymity in student-lecturer interactions.

Conversely, "money for marks" showed higher prevalence in private universities (36.9%) compared to public institutions (30.0%), reflecting a statistically significant association ($\chi^2 = 15.67$, $p < 0.001$). This pattern aligns with the commercial orientation of many private institutions, where education is explicitly treated as a business transaction, potentially normalizing the commodification of academic achievements. The relatively high prevalence of "hypothetical marks" across both institution types (15.2% overall) underscored the systemic nature of quality assurance failures in Uganda's higher education system, with private universities showing marginally higher rates (17.0% vs. 14.0%) suggesting weaker verification systems and academic oversight mechanisms in the private sector.

**Table 2: Stakeholder Confidence Levels by Exposure to Corrupt Practices**

| Confidence Level | Exposed to Corruption (n=1,345) | Not Exposed (n=1,502) | Total (N=2,847) |
|---|---|---|---|
| High Confidence | 134 (10.0%) | 751 (50.0%) | 885 (31.1%) |
| Moderate Confidence | 403 (30.0%) | 526 (35.0%) | 929 (32.6%) |
| Low Confidence | 538 (40.0%) | 180 (12.0%) | 718 (25.2%) |
| No Confidence | 270 (20.0%) | 45 (3.0%) | 315 (11.1%) |

The relationship between exposure to corrupt practices and stakeholder confidence showed a strong negative association ($\chi^2 = 847.23$, $p < 0.001$), with individuals exposed to academic corruption demonstrating significantly lower confidence levels in the higher education system. Among respondents who had experienced corrupt practices, only 10.0% maintained high confidence in the system, while 60.0% reported low or no confidence compared to only 15.0% among unexposed individuals. This stark contrast highlighted the corrosive effect of corrupt practices on institutional trust and credibility. The data revealed that exposure to corruption created a profound shift in stakeholder perceptions, with nearly two-thirds of affected individuals developing cynical attitudes toward the legitimacy of academic qualifications and institutional processes.

The moderate confidence category represented 30.0% of corruption-exposed respondents compared to 35.0% of unexposed individuals, suggesting that even partial exposure to corrupt practices significantly undermined faith in the system's integrity. The finding that 50.0% of unexposed respondents maintained high confidence levels, compared to only 10.0% of exposed individuals, demonstrated the critical importance of preventing initial exposure to corrupt practices. These results indicated that once students, staff, or employers witnessed or experienced academic corruption, their trust in the entire higher education ecosystem became fundamentally compromised, creating lasting skepticism that extended beyond specific institutions or incidents to encompass systemic doubts about the validity of Ugandan academic credentials.

**Table 3: Logistic Regression Analysis - Predictors of Corrupt Practice Exposure**

| Variable | Odds Ratio | 95% CI | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Institution Type (Private vs Public) | 1.24 | 1.07-1.44 | 0.004 |
| Gender (Male vs Female) | 0.78 | 0.67-0.91 | 0.001 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Academic Year (Final vs First)** | 2.15 | 1.78-2.59 | <0.001 |
| **Socioeconomic Status (Low vs High)** | 1.67 | 1.34-2.08 | <0.001 |
| **Academic Discipline (Applied vs Theoretical)** | 1.45 | 1.23-1.71 | <0.001 |
| **Regional Location (Urban vs Rural)** | 1.33 | 1.12-1.58 | 0.001 |
| **Family Income (<UGX 500,000 vs >UGX 2,000,000)** | 1.89 | 1.52-2.35 | <0.001 |

The multivariate logistic regression analysis identified several significant predictors of exposure to corrupt practices in Ugandan higher education. Students in their final academic years were more than twice as likely (OR = 2.15, 95% CI: 1.78-2.59) to encounter corrupt practices compared to first-year students, indicating that exposure risk increases with academic progression and proximity to graduation pressures. Lower socioeconomic status emerged as a strong predictor of corruption exposure (OR = 1.67, 95% CI: 1.34-2.08), with students from families earning less than UGX 500,000 monthly showing nearly double the risk (OR = 1.89, 95% CI: 1.52-2.35) compared to those from higher-income families. This pattern suggested that financial vulnerability creates conditions where students may be more susceptible to corrupt arrangements or more likely to seek alternative pathways to academic success when legitimate resources are unavailable.

Gender differences revealed that male students had lower odds of exposure (OR = 0.78, 95% CI: 0.67-0.91) compared to female students, reflecting the gendered nature of academic corruption, particularly "sex for marks" practices that disproportionately target women. Students in applied disciplines showed significantly higher exposure risk (OR = 1.45, 95% CI: 1.23-1.71) compared to those in theoretical fields, possibly due to the practical nature of assessments and closer industry connections that create additional opportunities for corrupt exchanges. The urban location effect (OR = 1.33, 95% CI: 1.12-1.58) suggested that institutions in urban areas, despite potentially better resources and oversight, may face unique challenges related to anonymity, commercial pressures, and diverse stakeholder interactions that facilitate corrupt practices. Private institution attendance (OR = 1.24, 95% CI: 1.07-1.44) showed modestly increased odds of corruption exposure, supporting the earlier bivariate findings about institutional type differences.

**Table 4: Impact Assessment - Academic and Professional Outcomes**

| Outcome Measure | Exposed Group (n=1,345) | Control Group (n=1,502) | Effect Size (Cohen's d) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Grade Point Average** | 2.8 ± 0.7 | 3.2 ± 0.6 | -0.63 |
| **Employment Rate (6 months post-graduation)** | 234/398 (58.8%) | 445/521 (85.4%) | - |
| **Starting Salary (UGX thousands)** | 850 ± 340 | 1,240 ± 420 | -1.02 |
| **Professional Skills Assessment Score** | 64.2 ± 12.8 | 78.5 ± 11.4 | -1.17 |
| **Employer Satisfaction Rating** | 6.2 ± 1.8 | 8.1 ± 1.4 | -1.18 |

The impact assessment revealed substantial negative effects of corruption exposure on academic and professional outcomes across multiple dimensions. Students who had been exposed to corrupt practices achieved significantly lower Grade Point Averages (2.8 vs 3.2, d = -0.63, p < 0.001), representing a moderate to large effect size that indicated meaningful academic performance differences. The employment outcomes showed even more dramatic disparities, with corruption-exposed graduates achieving only 58.8% employment rates within six months of graduation compared to 85.4% for their unexposed counterparts, representing a 26.6 percentage point gap that translated into substantial career disadvantages. Starting salaries for employed graduates from the exposed group averaged UGX 850,000 compared to UGX 1,240,000 for the control group, representing a 31.5% salary differential that reflected employer skepticism about the competencies of graduates from institutions or programs associated with corrupt practices. Professional skills assessments conducted by independent evaluators revealed large effect sizes (d = -1.17) between corruption-exposed and unexposed graduates, with mean scores of 64.2 versus 78.5 respectively on standardized competency measures. This finding suggested that corrupt practices not only undermined the credibility of qualifications but also resulted in genuine skills deficits among affected graduates, who had bypassed legitimate learning processes necessary for competency development. Employer satisfaction ratings showed similarly large differences (d = -1.18), with corruption-exposed graduates receiving average ratings of 6.2 compared to 8.1 for unexposed graduates on a 10-point scale. These comprehensive outcome measures demonstrated that academic corruption created cascading negative effects that extended far beyond the immediate educational context, fundamentally compromising the career prospects and professional effectiveness of affected individuals while simultaneously eroding employer confidence in the broader Ugandan higher education system.

**Discussion**

The findings from this comprehensive investigation revealed that academic corruption in Uganda's higher education system has reached crisis proportions, with nearly half of all stakeholders having encountered some form of corrupt practice during their educational experience. The prevalence rates of 32.8% for "money for marks," 15.4% for "sex for marks," and 15.2% for "hypothetical marks" demonstrated that these practices have become normalized within the educational ecosystem, creating a parallel economy where academic achievements are divorced from legitimate scholarly effort. The institutional variations observed between public and private universities reflected different corruption dynamics, with public institutions showing higher rates of sexual exploitation due to power imbalances and resource constraints, while private institutions exhibited greater commodification of grades through direct financial transactions (Mosha et al., 2022). These patterns aligned with broader theoretical frameworks of institutional

corruption, where different organizational structures and incentive systems create distinct vulnerabilities to unethical practices, ultimately undermining the fundamental purpose of higher education as a mechanism for human capital development and social mobility (Albert et al., 2024).

The demographic and socioeconomic predictors identified through the logistic regression analysis illuminated the systematic nature of educational inequality in Uganda, where students from lower-income families face double jeopardy of both financial barriers to education and increased vulnerability to corrupt practices. The finding that final-year students showed more than double the exposure risk suggested that corruption pressures intensify as academic stakes increase, particularly around graduation and certification processes where the economic value of credentials becomes most apparent (Vandana, 2020). The gendered nature of corruption, with female students facing higher exposure odds, reflected broader patterns of gender-based violence and exploitation within educational institutions, highlighting the intersection of academic corruption with fundamental human rights violations (Duque Monsalve et al., 2022). The disciplinary differences observed between applied and theoretical fields indicated that corruption mechanisms adapt to different assessment contexts, with practical disciplines potentially offering more opportunities for subjective evaluation and direct industry connections that facilitate corrupt exchanges, while the urban-rural divide suggested that institutional location influences both corruption opportunities and oversight capacity.

The cascade of negative outcomes documented in the impact assessment provided compelling evidence that academic corruption creates self-perpetuating cycles of educational degradation and economic inefficiency. The substantial gaps in employment rates, starting salaries, professional competencies, and employer satisfaction demonstrated that corrupt practices ultimately fail to deliver the career advancement they promise to students, instead creating credentials that signal incompetence to informed employers who can distinguish between legitimate and compromised qualifications (Mafa & Simango, 2022). The moderate to large effect sizes observed across all outcome measures indicated that these differences represent meaningful practical impacts rather than statistical artifacts, suggesting that corruption exposure fundamentally alters educational trajectories and professional prospects. The employer confidence data revealed that corruption not only harms individual students but also erodes trust in the entire Ugandan higher education brand, creating negative externalities that affect even legitimate graduates who may face skepticism about their qualifications in both domestic and international job markets, ultimately undermining Uganda's competitiveness in the global knowledge economy.

## Conclusions

This study conclusively demonstrated that corrupt practices have become deeply entrenched within Uganda's higher education system, creating a crisis of integrity that threatened the fundamental credibility of academic qualifications and the country's human capital development prospects. The investigation revealed that nearly half of all stakeholders had encountered some form of academic corruption, with "money for marks" being the most prevalent practice at 32.8%, followed by "sex for marks" at 15.4% and "hypothetical marks" at 15.2%. The research established that these corrupt practices were not isolated incidents but rather systematic phenomena that varied predictably based on institutional type, student demographics, socioeconomic status, and academic progression, with female students, final-year students, those from low-income families, and students in applied disciplines facing disproportionately higher exposure risks. The multivariate analysis confirmed that corruption exposure was significantly associated with institutional and individual characteristics, indicating that certain structural conditions within the higher education system actively facilitated unethical practices rather than deterring them.

The impact assessment provided compelling evidence that academic corruption created cascading negative effects that extended far beyond the immediate educational context, fundamentally compromising both individual career prospects and systemic confidence in Ugandan higher education. Students exposed to corrupt practices achieved significantly lower academic performance, employment rates, starting salaries, and professional competency scores, while simultaneously facing reduced employer satisfaction ratings that reflected genuine skills deficits resulting from bypassed learning processes. The strong negative association between corruption exposure and stakeholder confidence demonstrated that these practices created self-reinforcing cycles of institutional degradation, where decreased trust led to reduced investment in legitimate educational processes, further normalizing corrupt alternatives. The research concluded that Uganda's higher education system required immediate and comprehensive intervention to restore integrity, rebuild stakeholder confidence, and prevent the complete erosion of educational standards that threatened the country's long-term development prospects and international reputation.

## Recommendations

Establish Comprehensive Anti-Corruption Infrastructure: Based on the finding that 47.2% of stakeholders encountered corrupt practices across different institution types, Uganda should immediately establish a National Higher Education Integrity Commission with autonomous authority to investigate, prosecute, and prevent academic corruption. This commission should implement mandatory integrity training for all academic staff, establish anonymous reporting systems with protection for whistle blowers, and create standardized assessment and verification protocols across all higher education institutions.

Address Systemic Vulnerabilities Through Targeted Interventions: Given that female students, final-year students, and those from low-income families showed significantly higher corruption exposure risks, targeted protection and support systems must be implemented to address these vulnerabilities. Universities should establish gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms specifically for sexual exploitation cases, provide emergency financial assistance programs to reduce economic pressures that drive students toward corrupt practices, and implement mentorship programs that provide legitimate academic support for at-risk student populations.

Rebuild Stakeholder Confidence Through Transparency and Quality Assurance**:** To address the profound erosion of confidence where 60% of corruption-exposed stakeholders reported low or no confidence in the system, Uganda must implement comprehensive transparency and quality assurance measures that demonstrate institutional commitment to legitimate educational processes. This should include public reporting of institutional integrity metrics, standardized competency assessments administered by independent bodies, international accreditation for all degree programs, and employer engagement initiatives that rebuild trust in Ugandan qualifications.

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