



GLOBAL

Call to fight the spread of corruption in HE globally

Brendan O'Malley 13 April 2019

Corruption is ubiquitous and diverse in higher education, affecting every part of the world to some extent. It includes unethical, inappropriate, sometimes illegal practices, but the types and prevalences vary between countries, according to a new report published by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and the CHEA International Quality Group (CIQG).

Accreditation and quality assurance bodies (AQABs) in some countries such as Russia, Nigeria, India and the Western Balkans tend to be more aware of specific types of corruption affecting higher education compared to AQABs serving more developed countries, for instance those in Scandinavia.

The report found that, although in general AQABs have a range of sanctions they can apply to institutions to persuade them to address any evident corruption and malpractice, “most methods adopted for evaluating institutions are unlikely to uncover evidence of corruption”.

The **report**, *Policies and Actions of Accreditation and Quality Assurance Bodies to Counter Corruption in Higher Education*, is specifically addressed to organisations with responsibility for assuring quality and integrity of education or research, and the governmental bodies overseeing their operation and providing funding for their activities.

The study calls on AQABs to review their terms of reference and standards to more effectively address corruption and malpractice and make explicit their commitment to reducing corruption.

It sets out the results of a study conducted during 2017-18 for CHEA/CIQG and builds on recommendations from the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) and CHEA/CIQG **Advisory Statement** prepared by Sir John Daniel (IIEP & CIQG 2016), consolidating contributions from a panel of expert witnesses.

Evidence collected during the study came from a literature review, an online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and discussions. The analysis is based on 69 valid responses from AQABs and networks of AQABs and 22 more detailed contributions.

The study, which is written by Irene Glendinning, Stella-Maris Orim and Andrew King, all of Coventry University in the United Kingdom, is aimed at informing AQABs about the current situation on corruption in higher education globally, at influencing and enhancing

the effectiveness of policies that impact on different forms of corruption, recommending good practice and suggesting early warning indicators that can signal when quality assurance standards in higher education and research are compromised.

“The findings from this report also have implications for all other players in the higher education community in fighting corruption,” the report concludes. “In particular governments and professional bodies that establish AQABs and provide resources for them to operate have a responsibility for ensuring they have sufficient support and funding to discharge their responsibilities as recommended.”

“Every individual member of the higher educational community throughout the world, including members of government departments, accreditation panellists, institutional leaders, but also researchers, academics, clerical officers and students, all must play a part in upholding integrity and standards in higher education globally,” the report says.

The study looks at corruption in the regulation of higher education systems, the teaching role of higher education, student admission and recruitment, student assessment, credentials and qualifications, and research and publications.

But thematic analysis of the qualitative data identified three further categories to add to the six on which the research was based: corruption in the governance of higher education institutions; networking and cooperation between AQABs and other bodies to address corruption; and considerations on different perceptions of integrity, quality and standards.

Corruption in the regulation of higher education

Despite evidence of the existence of corruption in the regulation of higher education, 64% of respondents expressed no concern about it. Some were confident that existing measures being taken ensure corruption is kept under control.

In many Anglophone countries AQABS are pro-actively monitoring, supporting and engaging with higher education providers and responding to identified threats to standards and quality, the report said.

The report suggests that measures that can be taken include transparency in all aspects, including appointment of officials and publication of reports; respecting an integrity code; appointment of officials who have integrity and no conflicts of interest; cutting bureaucracy; introducing an independent authority to deal with complaints and appeals; independence of AQABs from governmental influences; restructuring of the private higher education sector; and spot checks on institutions.

Corruption in the governance of higher education institutions included examples of political interference potentially threatening institutions’ autonomy, examples of which were found in Australia, Brazil, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Turkey and the United States.

Actions included interfering in institutional decisions, banning subjects from the curriculum, imprisoning academics who disagree with prevailing politics and overriding research funding decisions.

Others examples included academic staff in India being driven to bribery to secure a teaching post in a convenient location due to the system of staff being posted by universities to affiliated colleges all over the country; university leaders and professors with fake or undeserved doctoral degrees impacting on the governance of some Russian universities; and fully plagiarised dissertations being supported by 'scientific advisors'.

Lack of global benchmarks

Another problem area is the lack of global benchmarks or standards for higher education or, where they exist, no consistency in how they are applied. This can result from a strong culture of autonomy and lack of robust internal and external quality assurance, as in the case of higher education providers in India, Russia and Germany, the report says.

Gender discrimination also remains a problem in some countries. The report cites the example of the Japanese university that decided several years ago to **routinely adjust examination results** to ensure no more than 30% of medical graduates were female.

Less than one third of respondents expressed concern about corruption in the teaching role but corruption in recruitment and promotion of academic staff and absenteeism of professors and teachers raised serious concerns in six responses.

Corruption in teaching can be side effects of massification, pressure to publish, financial pressures to maximise student progress, poor remuneration and job insecurity, the report said.

In Kosovo, for instance, 'ghost advising' or absenteeism by senior academics, often delegating their responsibilities for teaching or supervision to junior colleagues or research students, is widespread due to a shortage of professorial level academic subject experts and an unworkable regulatory framework for higher education.

Bullying, harassment and sexual harassment of staff and students were raised by respondents, including examples of teachers demanding sexual favours from students in return for preferential grades in many places; and students and teachers sexually harassing, threatening or harming academic teaching staff in Uganda.

Many concerns about admissions

There were many concerns about corrupt practices in higher education admissions and recruitment, particularly misleading advertising and falsified transcripts, fake letters of recommendation and cheating in admissions tests.

"Some highly organised and systematic corruption was exposed by a number of investigative journalists working in the UK, Australia, Canada and the US," the report says.

"Corrupt activities include generation by agents of falsified qualifications to secure higher education admissions and student visas; preferential admissions based on bribery, political connections or nepotism; admitting talented sports stars for membership of varsity teams without the necessary qualifications; using impersonators to take English language tests."

The arrest of dozens of wealthy or famous parents in the US over **charges of alleged bribery and fraud to secure admission** to elite universities for their children, in some cases involving money laundering to cover their tracks, is a high-profile example.

Another problem is the existence of fake institutions with branding similar to reputable universities.

Solutions that reduce corruption in admissions may include a centralised clearing system for all undergraduate applications (as in the UK and Lithuania) and a national university entrance examination (as in Russia and China).

Plagiarism and cheating

A large number of concerns were raised about plagiarism and cheating in continuous assessment, cheating in formal examinations and contract cheating or the use of essay mills and ghost writers.

Actions taken by AQABs, governments and institutions against these problems include supporting the development or purchase of software for aiding detection of plagiarism (UK, Slovakia, Slovenia); providing guidance (UK, Australia); legislating to make contract cheating companies and advertising their services illegal (New Zealand, Ireland); using legislation to prosecute fraudulent conduct (US, New Zealand); or challenging misleading advertising (UK).

Questions on credentials and qualifications were answered by 40 out of 69 respondents, the second highest area of worry. Here the most concern was expressed about degree mills and accreditation mills, followed by falsification of transcripts and degree certificates and false statements about qualifications on CVs and job applications.

An evolving solution is the Groningen Declaration Network, a rapidly growing network of international organisations which are each offering a service to verify academic qualifications, many of them supported by national governments. Groningen Declaration Network members are increasingly forming partnerships with other members to extend the range of qualifications they are able to verify.

Detecting unearned qualifications and degrees that have been conferred fraudulently or negligently by genuine universities is more difficult but is important because it can be particularly harmful to others when people with degrees they did not deserve find themselves in responsible roles, such as in medicine, education or engineering.

Curiously, respondents showed the least concern about corruption in research and academic publishing, where the problem most frequently raised was plagiarism in academic publications, followed by translation plagiarism in manuscripts and supervisors publishing work conducted by students.

But the report warns that this does not mean all is well in research and academic publishing, because “other evidence paints a very different picture”.

The governments of the UK, China and Sweden have each recently initiated measures to

strengthen research ethics and address misconduct in research and academic publication. The UK's concordat built on important international influences, including the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, the report says.

Recommendations for AQABs

The study calls on AQABs to ensure scrupulousness about transparency, accountability and integrity and be ready to challenge higher education providers about any corrupt practice.

It says AQABs should proactively monitor and respond to suspicions of misconduct and corruption and arrange site visits at short notice to counter any potential 'gaming' of the quality assurance process or accreditation by universities.

They have a central role in supporting the development of educational and research quality and helping higher education providers address corruption – and should take a leadership role in advocating legislation to counter threats from diploma mills and accreditation mills, as well as contract cheating companies, the report says.

It calls on AQABs to carry out research and consult with higher education stakeholders, including students, to inform and enhance policies and practices for addressing corruption and misconduct in education and research.

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