Can Quality Assurance Beat Corruption in Higher Education?

Irene Glendinning

Abstract
Corruption undermines the operational basis for civil and cultural society. Corruption in higher education or research leads to an erosion of trust in academic credentials and claims of scientific breakthroughs. External bodies tasked with quality assurance and accreditation of higher education providers have an important role for ensuring that appropriate standards are maintained. However, in recent research, responses from reputable bodies to concerns about corruption did not always provide the expected reassurances.

If you believe that corruption in education is a rare phenomenon or that this only applies to low-income countries, then think again. In this article, I share some insights gained from more than a decade of research into how academic integrity and corruption are perceived and managed in different parts of the world.

Surveying Corruption

Between 2010 and 2018, European colleagues and I surveyed higher education institutions (HEIs) in 38 European and Eurasian countries, asking about their academic integrity policies and practices. One project was funded by the European Commission and two by the Council of Europe. Although our initial interest was to reduce student plagiarism, we discovered complex influences in relationships between students, their teachers, university governance, and local political, cultural, and societal norms. Bribery, fraud, nepotism, and deliberate cheating were reported almost everywhere we looked. Although there were national and regional differences in the extent and nature, educational corruption was apparent in every country we studied.

During 2016–2017, two UK colleagues and I conducted a global study on corruption in higher education for the Council for Higher Education Accreditation's International Quality Group (CIQG). CIQG were interested in exploring how accreditation agencies and quality assurance bodies (AQABs) in different parts of the world respond to corrupt practices that they encounter during their operations. We defined corruption as deliberate actions to gain an unfair advantage for monetary or other benefits. We surveyed using an online questionnaire, capturing 69 valid responses, and we conducted 22 interviews.

Quality Assurance and Academic Integrity

Connecting quality assurance (QA) and academic integrity is an important dynamic, especially for higher education.

Connecting quality assurance (QA) and academic integrity is an important dynamic, especially for higher education. But QA can mean very different things to different people. A QA expert whom I interviewed for this research said that "quality" is often used without fully understanding what it means. I believe that basing the assurance of quality on academic standards and integrity is more meaningful and powerful than considering "quality" in isolation. HEIs that do not invest in academic integrity are at risk of undermining their quality and standards. All institutions need systemic internal checks on quality, standards, and integrity to counter corruption and malpractice. QA audit panels and accreditation bodies can provide an important external perspective and help to enhance institutional practices. However, institutions are naturally selective about what they share with AQABs; looking for or presenting evidence of corruption within an institutional context is not normally part of anyone's agenda.

Globally, accreditation is a more common reason for external institutional scrutiny than QA auditing, but the motivation and *modus operandi* of accreditation bodies vary hugely. Accreditation can be used to decide on allocation of government funding, student grants, and loans; by professional bodies to check on subject content and assessment methods for professional registration of graduates; and to confer recognition and kudos on an institution or discipline. Some AQABs operate commercially, for profit, and not all are interested in quality and standards.

What Does Corruption in Higher Education Look Like?

The CIQG study explored how corruption is addressed in all aspects of higher education, encompassing government responsibilities, the external quality assurance process, institutional governance, the teaching role, admissions and recruitment, student learning and assessment, qualifications and credentials, academic research, and scholarly publishing.

In an educational context, corruption normally involves people neglecting or flouting their responsibilities, taking advantage of privileges, and/or breaching the trust placed in them. Corrupt practices can be initiated by any person involved in the educational process, ranging from government officials to students. Financial gain is a common motivator for corruption, but the driver could be personal, educational, or related to career advancement or other rationales, including sexual harassment. Sometimes, people are persuaded or compelled toward engaging in unacceptable practices, as victims and perpetrators, through ignorance, pressure, bullying, or desperation. Some involved are consciously corrupt, but others may see no alternative or do not consider their conduct corrupt.

Corruption in education means that someone gains an unfair advantage at the expense of others. In extreme cases, corruption can have serious public safety implications, such as when a qualified but underskilled professional engineer or medic has responsibility for life-critical decisions.

In countries where loyalty to family and friends are cultural requirements, nepotism and ignoring conflicts of interest are often normalized and not considered to be forms of corruption. Conversely, in high trust countries such as New Zealand, or in Scandinavia, there is far less public discussion about corruption, and often denial, when suggestions of malpractice are raised.

The literature that we explored showed many forms of corruption in every country and educational system. Some types of corruption are fueled by local conditions and contexts. For example, low wages or precarity of employment for professors or recruiters make it more likely that attempted bribery will be successful, to raise grades, overlook cheating, or secure student admission.

Conclusions

Our findings demonstrated that very few of the AQAB respondents had any concerns about the types of corruption reported in literature, press, media, and social media, and even fewer of these organizations were taking action to address the underlying causes of corruption in education and research. The AQABs taking action, mainly from Anglophone countries, especially Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, have been instrumental in improving national legislative powers against essay mills and fake universities. They have created guidance for educational institutions, raising awareness and helping them develop effective policies.

The more active AQABs, together with governments and nongovernmental organizations, researchers, and international agencies, are proactively investigating and sharing knowledge to provide guidance, training, effective services, and support. We also owe a huge debt to investigative journalism for providing key evidence about corruption in education that would be difficult to uncover through academic research.

In August 2018, CIQG published the "Inventory of Key Questions for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Organizations," based on our recommendations, which, together with the report from our research, is downloadable for free from their website.

Understanding the threats and underlying causes will help to ensure that appropriate action is taken to counter corruption. Both proactive and reactive approaches are needed by those with decision-making powers and the authority and responsibility to act, both to root out corruption and respond when evidence arises. International collaboration is required where the nature and global scale of corruption demands. The starting point is recognizing that something needs to be done about all forms of corruption in education. Instilling integrity in the next generation of professionals throughout their education is an important part of the broader response against corruption in society.

Irene Glendinning is associate professor at the Office of Teaching and Learning, Coventry University, UK. Email: csx128@coventry.ac.uk.