Global Corruption Report: Education

TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL

earthscan
publishing for a sustainable future
London • New York

TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL
the global coalition against corruption

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2013
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Edited by Gareth Sweeney, Krina Despota and Samira Lindner

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record has been requested for this book

ISBN13: 978-0-415-53544-1 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-415-53549-6 (pbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-203-10981-6 (ebk)

Illustrations by Agur Paesüld.
Typeset in Helvetica
by Keystroke, Station Road, Codsall, Wolverhampton

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3.1

Higher education institutions

Why they matter and why corruption puts them at risk

Stephen Heyneman[1]

Although corruption in education has precedents spanning hundreds of years,[2] global attention to it did not begin until the 1990s. Over the next decade this attention expanded from definitions and questions as to how common it was[3] to include the differences in the nature of corruption in different parts of the world, ranging from financial corruption and student plagiarism to sexual violence.[4] Once these elements had been mapped, the next set of issues concerned the degree to which it might affect an economy and labour market prospects,[5] and the degree to which it might be ameliorated through policy reforms.[6]

The current state of corruption in higher education

Higher education is no longer for the elite. In some OECD countries enrolment rates stand at over 60 per cent of the age cohort; in middle-income countries the proportion is rapidly approaching 30 per cent and in low-income countries the proportion is approaching 15 per cent, the point widely regarded as the transition between elite and mass higher education systems.[7] The problem is that the definition of quality in higher education is rapidly shifting. It now includes universal access to electronic library resources, modern laboratories and efficiency in teaching. Financial resources from public sources have not been able to keep pace with the changes. All higher education institutions are involved in a competitive environment to (1) diversify their resources, (2) allocate resources more efficiently, (3) generate additional resources from traditional sources and (4) cut back on services and programmes that are deemed insufficiently justified. Even in those western European countries in which the state continues to attempt to deliver higher education free of private cost, this competitive environment is an inevitable concomitant of our era.

Competition for resources, fame and notoriety place extraordinary pressures on higher education institutions. The weaker ones, those with an absence of control or managerial strength, are most prone to corruption. In some instances, corruption has invaded whole systems of higher education and threatens the reputation of research products and graduates regardless of their guilt or innocence.

Where this has occurred, corruption has reduced the economic rate of return on higher education investment by public institutions and individual students alike.[8] Whole countries have acquired a reputation for academic dishonesty, raising questions about all their graduates and doubts about their institutions.[9] Efforts to homogenise regional systems, such as the Bologna Process, may have to come to a halt as a result of having parts of their region typified by corruption.

Corruption can arise at the early stage of *recruitment and admission*. The *Global Corruption Report* cites numerous examples in which students feel that they have to pay a bribe to be admitted to a particular university or programme. Mention is made of a common shadow price to particular institutions and programmes. In some parts of the world, bribery is so common that some students participate in it as a safety net. They pay a bribe on the grounds that, because everyone else is doing it, they do not want to be left behind for not participating. In this instance corruption has reached a tipping point, and the reputation of the system itself is in danger of 'collapse'. A higher education system that has collapsed is one in which the perception of corruption is so generalised that no graduate is free of being tainted. It extends to the purchase of examinations and grades. Graft is particularly common with oral examinations. For instance, more than 50 per cent of the students who participated in a survey in Bosnia and Herzegovina pointed to corruption as the single most important problem facing the higher education system, while half stated that they themselves would cheat in an exam if they believed they would not be caught.[10]

Financial fraud remains a major challenge for universities. The *Global Corruption Report* shows that government financial reductions have reduced systems of internal control established to prevent financial fraud. Because each faculty may have its own cost centre, financial monitoring is difficult. Student associations often handle money separately from the university administration. Fraud can be committed by skimming accounts, through the use of shell companies or through fictitious expenses. Deterrence can be obtained by clear policies governing fraud, internal controls and rapid prosecution of the perpetrators of fraud.

A significant trend in higher education, directly related to global internet access, is an avalanche of so-called '*degree mills*'. There are thousands of them, located in all regions, and there is also a Wikipedia page that lists house pets that have earned degrees. How might one recognise a degree mill? They often promise a degree within a short amount of time and with low costs; they give credit for non-academic experience; their websites often list their addresses as being a post box. Equally dangerous are fake accreditation agencies, promising quick assessments and permanent accreditation.

The dramatic increase in *cross-border educational programmes* raises new questions. The *Global Corruption Report* notes that risk involves three areas: the recognition of degrees, the use of recruitment agents to encourage international students and the establishment of programmes abroad by institutions of dubious reputation. In spite of the fact that the cross-border provision of higher education raises new risks of corruption, it may also be a conduit for cross-border integrity when institutions deliver high-quality programmes. In other words, the cross-border provision of higher education offers the opportunity for local students and institutions to observe how a corrupt-free institution operates. This 'leading by example' may be effective in lowering the risk in environments in which corruption is common, and it is one reason for lowering barriers to foreign education providers.

To attract students, institutions may *exaggerate the success of their graduates in the labour market*. This may be a particular problem with the for-profit institutions and with particular low-quality programmes in the vocations. The paper concludes with an emphasis on 'smart disclosure', when institutions release information to allow the consumer to know exactly what he or she is purchasing and how to make comparisons with similar institutions.

The *Global Corruption Report* also encompasses *academic integrity* as an essential component. Academic integrity is described as consisting of values of honesty, trust, respect, fairness and responsibility and 'is fundamental to the reputation of academic institutions'. Nonetheless, students who cheat are common; in some environments, they are the norm. A lack of integrity includes the practice of plagiarism, cheating, unauthorised use of others' work, paying for assignments claimed as one's own, the falsification of data, downloading assignments from the internet, the misrepresentation of records and fraudulent publishing. It also includes paying for grades with gifts, money or sexual favours. If left unchecked, a lack of student integrity undermines the credibility of degrees. The point is also made that students, when asked, overwhelmingly claim that they know how to avoid an academic integrity breach if they have sufficient and clear information defining integrity, which is one reason for having clear codes of conduct.

The *sources of funding* for universities can create dilemmas arising from the fact that universities need to generate and diversify resources. The report describes a 'clash of cultures' between commercial and traditional academic values and shows how some sources may wish to suppress results that do not correspond to their corporate interests. Several suggestions are offered on how the 'clash' can be successfully negotiated, including conflict-of-interest policies, contracts that protect researcher autonomy, 'freedom-to-publish' clauses and measures to prevent academic 'ghostwriting'. The report also illustrates that government or private funding can raise ethical questions when there is undue influence on academic research or when questionable source funds are not adequately vetted.

Academic success is determined by access to high-quality *journals*. These journals rely on professionals who donate their time to reviewing articles. What maintains the integrity of these journals? How do journals know if the articles they publish are written legitimately? The *Global Corruption Report* outlines the means by which editors screen for cheating, the way they plan for allegations of fraud and how peer review is strengthened.

Addressing the issue

There are significant approaches and initiatives under way to address corruption in higher education. From Zimbabwe to Finland, over 90 countries now have formal laws allowing public *access to information* from public institutions.[11] Most universities are public, and therefore are subject to the same laws as other public institutions. While access to information cannot guarantee a reduction in corruption nor provide a significant empowerment of the public, it can be 'an effective tool for claiming other rights' and establishing accountability structures. The *Global Corruption Report* assesses the possibility that higher education corruption could be reduced if universities were more transparent about their internal decision-making.

Quality assurance is essential to tackling corruption in higher education, but can also be corrupted itself. These processes may include accreditation, assessment (judging institutional performance), audit (checking on procedures to ensure standards of provision and/or outcomes), authorisation (the certification of programmes of study), licensing (permission to operate) and recognition (the acknowledgement of institutional status). The *Global Corruption Report* details ways to tell whether accreditation bodies serve the public good.

The *Global Corruption Report* outlines the ingredients of good university governance for combating corruption. These include integrity in the delivery of education services (measured by external quality reviews) and honesty in the attainment and use of financial resources (measured by external auditing and due diligence processes respectively). The process of selecting university leaders is mentioned, and it is recommended that a process of competitive professional selection be used. It is also mentioned that universities should be governed

by autonomous boards of trust. Four aspects of autonomy are listed, all of which need to become the norm: organisational autonomy, staffing autonomy, financial autonomy and academic autonomy. If university governance is appropriate in these ways, university corruption can be reduced.

There is no more important category of actor in a discussion of higher education corruption than the *professorate*. The professorate is both a cause of the problem and a solution. The *Global Corruption Report* points out that the wider environment of competition and commoditisation raises new pressures on faculty members, and in some cases those pressures may lead to corrupt behaviour. Among the pressures may be a shift in 'communal norms', which may fail to provide sufficient reward for good behaviour. A second can be an imbalance between teaching and research, in which the latter is informally taken to be the only criterion of excellence. Lastly, there is the issue of an imbalance in the structure of rewards between tenure track members and adjunct faculty members, with the latter often treated unfairly. The report points out that the power of faculty senates has eroded over time and that university managers act in an increasingly cavalier fashion, because power is now concentrated with them. The report concludes that it is common for faculty to perceive a difference between their beliefs about good behaviour and the realities of their day-to-day workplace.

Several articles present innovative approaches, including, for example, the *ranking of universities* on the basis of governance performance. The Romanian Academic Society informs universities that responsiveness in providing the 20 requested documents will be used in the ranking. University documents were then coded for transparency and responsiveness based on the number received and the speed of delivery, and were then analysed for academic integrity, quality of governance and financial management.

In other articles the *Global Corruption Report* highlights the fact that some methods of addressing corruption can give rise to new problems. In Georgia, for instance, it is correctly pointed out that great progress has been made in fighting corruption through *standardised examinations*, which cannot easily be corrupted. Corruption seems to continue in other ways, however, such as through the use of test designers as high-priced private tutors and by old-fashioned bribery in the facilitation of institutional transfer once entry has been obtained.

What needs more careful discussion?

1 Definitional limits of corruption

Among some there is a tendency to suggest that, when universities do not perform well, it is a sign of corruption. Bad management, inefficiency, a concentration of power, slowness in making decisions and a reluctance to share confidential information are not signs of corruption. To some, when educational institutions seek non-traditional sources of income, it may be confused with corruption.[12] Universities are large, complex institutions in a highly competitive environment, and, like all other organisations, they need to make complex and private decisions that cannot be made efficiently if they have to be made in public.[13] There is good reason for confidentiality of decision-making. Management decisions can affect the lives of thousands of students, faculty, donors, and the ability of the organization to prosper. Autonomy means that the confidentiality in their decision-making authority must be protected, and management practices, whether they are confidential or inefficient, should not be confused with corruption.

2 Differences in corruption levels

While it is true that there are instances of corruption in every country, this does not mean that corruption in higher education is distributed identically. In some circumstances it is endemic,

affecting the entire system; in other cases it is occasional. In some circumstances it is monetary in nature; in others it tends to center on personal transgressions such as plagiarism; and in still others faculty behavior in the form of sexual misconduct is the dominant problem. There is no higher education equivalent of Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index that allows a ranking of countries. Nevertheless, where international students intend to study is related to the differences in higher education corruption. In general, students act to leave places where corruption is rampant and prefer to study where it is minor.[14]

3 Differences between institutional and individual corruption

Although these categories of higher education corruption overlap, their causes and solutions should be differentiated. Institutional corruption – financial fraud, the illegal procurement of goods and services, tax avoidance – are often problems that can be handled through the enforcement of legislation that pertains to other institutions outside higher education. Individual corruption – faculty misbehaviour, cheating on examinations, plagiarism, the falsification of research results – constitutes transgressions of faculty and student codes of professional conduct. In the first, the main conduit of control is legislation and its enforcement. In the second, the main conduit of control is internal to the university. Legislation should not attempt to include infractions of individual corruption on behalf of individual students and faculty.

4 The environment and corruption

While it is true that competition and new attention to higher education revenues place new pressures on faculty, it is insufficient to use these pressures as an excuse to engage in corrupt practices. Nor is it sufficient to suggest that, because corrupt behaviour is common elsewhere, one's own engagement in corrupt behaviour can be excused. Even in environments in which corruption is virtually universal there are 'resisters' to corruption, whose entire ethos is based on their personal moral standards and on their own authority.[15]

5 Are anti-corruption measures international?

There are some who might argue that all solutions are local. They might argue that anti-corruption measures have to be based on domestic laws and values. Although there are numerous instances in which this is correct, there appear to be some instances in which universal measures are already the norm. For instance, in the case of world-class universities ranked by the *Times Higher Education* magazine across 40 countries,[16] 98 per cent list an average of nine ethical infrastructure elements – for example codes of conduct for faculty, students and administrators, honours councils – on their websites. Selecting countries at random, there is considerable contrast with highly ranked universities. For instance, the typical university in Russia had 2.8 ethical infrastructure elements on their websites. Yet these elements were more numerous in Russia than the 1.4 elements in Belarus and none at all in Gabon, Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan.[17]

The future of work on higher education and corruption

New and meaningful functions should be found for *international agencies*. UNESCO is constituted to serve the educational interests of all nations, high- and low-income ones alike. Finding ways to combat higher education corruption is a viable candidate for UNESCO's attention and extra-budgetary support.[18] UNESCO could assist countries in establishing a constructive strategy covering examination procedures, accountability and transparency codes, and adjudication structures such as student and faculty courts of conduct, for example.[19]

Regional organisations too have an important role to play. This is particularly the case with the European Union and the Council of Europe. To participate in the Bologna Process, universities and the countries in which they are situated need to be recognised. This accreditation procedure could easily include mechanisms to combat corruption. Development assistance agencies, the World Bank, the regional development banks and the many bilateral organisations also have important roles. In its own way, each organisation places criteria on grants and loans for education projects. Among the criteria they could use might be the infrastructure against corruption noted above. In addition, among the criteria to which they hold countries accountable to justify new loans and grants would be the anti-corruption performance of their higher education systems and evidence that the incidence of corruption had declined, that the level of transparency had increased and that the public perception of corruption had shifted downward.

Regular surveys should play a role. Transparency International has assisted the world's understanding of general corruption through a series of surveys gauging the degree to which a nation's business and government are perceived to be corrupt, such as through the Corruption Perceptions Index and the Global Corruption Barometer. This same set of indicators should be used on a regular basis to calculate the degree to which a system of higher education is perceived to be corrupt. Transparency International need not be the sole source of this information, however. Similar surveys should be sponsored by many international agencies, foundations such as the Open Society Institute, local newspapers and journals, and local government agencies. It should be a matter of pride that both the level of participation in corruption in education, as well as the public perception of corruption, are on the decline. If governments encourage such surveys it is a healthy sign; if governments forbid such surveys it is a sign that they have not yet understood the level of risk involved by being passive.

Perception is all-important. It is common for individuals as well as institutions to deny wrongdoing when accused. 'Where is the evidence?' they may ask. It is a logical and common reaction. This is the wrong approach when it comes to corruption in education, however. When an institution is perceived to be corrupt the damage is already done, regardless of whether guilt is manifest. Perception is the only evidence needed for the effect to occur. This is one reason why world-class universities post anti-corruption efforts on their websites.[20] This implies that any university, in any culture, that has ambitions to become a world-class institution is required to erect a similar ethical infrastructure, otherwise the possibility for that institution to live up to its ambitions is essentially zero. This requires a change of attitude on the part of rectors and university administrators. It requires them to shift from a mode of self-protection and denial to a mode of transparency and active engagement, even when the evidence may be disturbing and/or painful. If the best universities in the world submit themselves to such ethical inspections, then the others can too.

Notes

1. Stephen Heyneman is Professor of International Education Policy at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.
2. Consider this report from the time of the Ch'ing dynasty, which began in 1644 in China: 'In his report to Emperor Hsien Feng, Su Shen charged five high-ranking judges with accepting bribes. Also in his report he presented 91 cases in which test scores had been mishandled, and challenged the past year's first-place winner. To restore the reputation of the civil service, the Emperor ordered the beheading of all five judges and the first-place winner. People cheered the action, and Su Shun became a household name.' Anchee Min, *Empress Orchid* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), p.150.

3. Stephen Heyneman, 'Education and Misconduct', in James Guthrie (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Education*, vol. 5 (New York: Macmillan, 2003), pp. 1659–1668.
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3.2

Governance instruments to combat corruption in higher education

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Fraud, corruption and other types of unethical behaviour are an unfortunate reality of tertiary education worldwide. Examples can be found in nearly every tertiary education system, in rich and poor countries alike, spanning virtually every aspect of the operation of colleges and universities – from admissions to academics and research, financial management and hiring and promotion.

As governments and the broader higher education community seek to curtail fraudulent behaviour, governance is a critical consideration. Poor oversight, ineffective governance structures and biased decision-making by individuals in power can facilitate corrupt behaviour and erode public trust. Conversely, good governance can serve as a powerful tool in preventing, detecting and punishing unethical behaviour, thereby enhancing the ability of higher education to fulfil its mission and maximise its contributions to society.

Models of governance?

The term 'governance' refers to 'all those structures, processes and activities that are involved in the planning and direction of the institutions and people working in tertiary education'.[2] Currently there are a variety of governance models in place around the world, with varying levels of government control and centralisation. At one end are countries such as Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia and Malaysia,[3] in which public universities are either agencies of the education ministry or state-owned corporations; governance functions are largely controlled by the national government. At the other end of the spectrum are countries that have no government ministry or agency at all responsible for supervision. This is the case in Peru and several Central American countries,[4] where the institutions largely govern themselves.

Occupying the middle ground of this continuum are models in which governance is shared by government and higher education institutions, as well as outside bodies such as governing boards and independent quality assurance agencies. Higher education policy expert John Fielden reports a worldwide trend from central control to 'steering at a distance', whereby more autonomous public universities enjoy increased authority and responsibilities.[5] Such shared governance models have become more common in recent years, as tertiary education