

Combatting Academic Corruption: What Might the International Quality Assurance Community Do?

Good day everybody! For me it is definitely 'good morning' because I am in Vancouver where it is only six am on a cold and frosty morning. But it's a pleasure to talk to you anyway.

I had the privilege of being co-chair of the Expert Meeting on Academic Corruption that CHEA/CIQG convened with UNESCO back in March and also of being the rapporteur who pulled together our report.

Stamenka has just set the scene and reminded us of two key features of this Webinar. First, we are talking about academic corruption. There are plenty of opportunities for other kinds of corruption in higher education such as dodgy real estate transactions for selling and buying institutional land, embezzlement in the finance office and so on. But our group and our report concentrated on academic corruption because that has the highest potential for long-term damage to society.

There is an obvious danger to organisations and the public if people are employed on the basis of phoney credentials or even genuine documents and transcripts that do not accurately reflect a graduate's learning outcomes and achievements. But in the longer run it is a much bigger problem if students leave higher education believing that cheating and lying are normal and accepted behaviour in today's society.

The second key point, related to our focus on academic corruption, is that today's discussion is about the role of quality assurance in the fight against corruption.

For some forms of corruption the correct action is to call in the police, but higher education systems and institutions have the greater role in protecting the integrity of the teaching, learning, assessment and credentialling processes that are the core of our work.

Let me say a few words about our Advisory Statement and then talk about one action that the higher education community can take. The Advisory Statement is in three parts: a four-page introduction to the issue; a list of examples of good and bad practices; and a matrix suggesting the areas where each of the various higher education stakeholders can play a role.

I take six points from our introduction to the issue.

First, corruption is an ugly word. Many people prefer euphemisms like misconduct or misrepresentation. We thought it better to 'call a spade a spade' (as the British say) and call it corruption.

Second, corruption affecting the integrity of universities' academic operations occurs both upstream and downstream from the work of quality assurance bodies. Upstream it can infect government and society generally, downstream it can be present at all levels in

higher education institutions. Action on a broad front is needed to attack the problem but today we are focussing on the role of QA.

The first of the seven international quality principles that CHEA/CIQG published last year says that 'assuring and achieving quality in higher education is the primary responsibility of higher education providers and their staff.' I shall suggest one action that institutions can take.

Third, we like to comfort ourselves that corruption happens somewhere else - particularly in developing countries. By making a large out-of-court settlement to end litigation around his allegedly fraudulent university, president-elect Trump has made this illusion unsustainable. The debates around the treatment of his businesses once he is in the White House also remind us that the notion of conflict of interest, a common basis for corruption, can be absent or misunderstood anywhere.

Fourth, at a time when scarcely a week goes by without public figures running for cover after leaks about their involvement in bribery, stashing money offshore, tax evasion, sexual harassment and suchlike, why should higher education try to swim against the tide?

One reason is that in most domains university graduates will provide the future leadership of their communities and drive their development. If they experience corrupt behaviour as a normal part of their student days they are less likely to avoid such practices later in life. A doctor who was given police protection after exposing a massive cheating ring involving medical school entrance exams in India commented: 'The next generation of doctors is being taught to cheat and deceive even before they enter the classroom'.

Another reason for paying special attention to corruption in higher education is that the needs of societies cannot be met if graduates do not have the competencies that HEIs purport to have given them. The health sector is not the only field where people's lives are endangered if practitioners do not have the knowledge and skills attested in their degree certificates from accredited HEIs. Corruption in higher education has a high cost to society. Yet we hear politicians – even heads of state – urging the importance of expanding higher education while being shameless about the phony PhDs they hold themselves!

Fifth, in the matrix we include five key academic functions: the organization of teaching, admissions, examinations and assessment, degree awarding and certification, and research theses/publications. We restricted our focus on research to graduate degrees and publications. While there is huge potential for corruption in the awarding and management of research contracts we did not address that.

Sixth, and finally, among the seven sets of stakeholders listed in our matrix, I want to say a particular word about students. While students can be perpetrators of corruption, they are also vital allies in fighting it. They have a greater interest in seeing their HEI maintain

a reputation for probity and quality than anyone, since they will be its alumni for life. Furthermore, involving students in processes aimed at eliminating corruption also encourages greater transparency in academic processes. This is another important weapon for promoting integrity. Sunlight is still a good disinfectant!

Therefore a key action in the fight against corruption is to ensure that students are clear in their minds about what are corrupt practices and what are not. I suggest that there are better ways of doing this than simply giving them a booklet about student conduct and the penalties for misconduct.

A few months ago I noticed that the University of Auckland, New Zealand, offers a MOOC on *Academic Integrity* through the FutureLearn consortium. I took it as a student and found it excellent. I found it interesting that this course originated in New Zealand, which is one of the world's least corrupt countries.

On Transparency International's index of perceived corruption, where Denmark comes top and Somalia comes last, New Zealand ranks number 4. For comparison Canada is 9th, the UK 12th and the US 17th. So if New Zealand finds it necessary to educate its students about corruption, all the more reason for more corrupt countries like yours and mine to do likewise.

The course takes only a few hours to complete and a great feature is the many quizzes included in each week's work. Any student who worked through this MOOC would have a much better and more nuanced understanding of what constitutes academic integrity than they could get from a student handbook. I recommend requiring students to this or a similar course as one important action that could be incorporated in the internal quality assurance processes of institutions.