

ETHICS, CORRUPTION, & AUTHORITY

Contemporary Higher Education: An Environment Ripe for Corruption

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The global competition for rankings and the current geopolitical challenges are just two of the issues fueling corruption in higher education in various forms, including data manipulation, biased recruitment, unethical authorship, and other problems eroding integrity and transparency. Since cultural norms and other systemic pressures can blur ethical boundaries, it is crucial to explore the causes, cultural dimensions, and reforms needed to restore accountability and ethical governance.

Corruption in higher education is widely condemned as a threat to academic integrity, institutional credibility, and societal trust. Yet, as the current state of higher education and the landscape of global competition for prestige and rankings intensifies, the boundaries between strategic governance and corruption become increasingly blurred. While corruption is inherently harmful, undermining meritocracy, distorting data, and enabling unethical behavior, its manifestations are often complex, shaped by incentives, pressures, and systemic loopholes. This ambivalence calls not only for condemnation but also for deeper structural reforms and thoughtful remedies.

The phenomenon is not new but has increased substantively due to the pressures of massification, the importance of the knowledge economy, related competition, and internationalization. Current geopolitical tensions and national security concerns will add new dimensions to higher education. With the immense expansion of higher education worldwide and its increasing diversification and complexity, the opportunities for corruption, over-commercialization, and other practices have expanded. Contemporary higher education—with its internationalization, new technologies, distance education and joint degrees, knowledge distribution systems, high-stakes admissions and related testing industry, academic promotion structures, and other conditions—is perhaps uniquely primed for a variety of corrupt practices, despite being a system that generally adheres to respect for academic values and ethics.

Crossing Ethical Lines

The pursuit of improved global rankings has led universities and governments to implement strategic actions intended to boost visibility and performance. Measures such as merging institutions, recruiting international students and faculty, professionalizing marketing, and rewarding high-impact research are certainly legitimate. However, in practice, academic

research and media reports reveal that these practices often cross ethical lines, leading to what is known as Goodhart's law: "As soon as an indicator becomes a target, gaming ensues, which forecloses its ability to function as a good indicator." Institutions can (and sometimes do) inflate internationalization metrics through practices such as optimizing faculty-student ratios by deliberately omitting adjunct faculty or postgraduate students in their official data or recruiting international scholars without disclosing their first affiliations. While these actions may superficially enhance institutional rankings, they ultimately misrepresent institutional capacity and compromise transparency.

In the realm of research, corruption takes more insidious forms. Pre-determined peer-review processes, sophisticated forms of plagiarism, and pressure to falsify data or self-cite are increasingly being reported. These practices not only distort the scientific record but also reinforce a toxic culture of hyper-competition. One of the most troubling trends is the elimination of faculty members with lower publication counts, regardless of their teaching quality or service contributions. This creates an environment where quantity trumps quality and ethical considerations are sidelined.

Corruption in faculty recruitment and student admissions further illustrate the complexity of the problem. Nepotism, fake credentials, and side-door or back-door admissions through donations or non-transparent scholarships, as illustrated perfectly in the US Varsity Blues scandal (2019), reflect both institutional desperation and inequality in access. In some cases, the line between incentive and manipulation is crossed when legacy-based or donor-favored admissions circumvent merit-based criteria.

Cultural Challenges

Culture is an additional challenge in dealing with corruption. In some academic systems, the application of rules and laws can be

uneven, with individuals treated differently based on their social status, affiliations, or political agenda. In contexts where corruption is widespread, unethical practices may be overlooked, especially when more pressing issues dominate institutional priorities. This creates a paradox where individuals publicly condemn corruption yet justify their own participation in it, adhering to conflicting moral codes. A striking example is the practice of unethical authorship, where individuals are listed as authors despite making minimal or no contributions to the work. This may occur in various ways: supervisors may be credited as a gesture of gratitude by doctoral students, senior researchers might coerce junior colleagues into including their names, or peers may request authorship as a favor—sometimes even negotiating it as a transactional exchange. While some view such practices as voluntary acts of goodwill, others face implicit pressure to comply, revealing the complex and often ambiguous nature of academic integrity in these environments. This duality underscores how deeply embedded, and culturally contingent, unethical behaviors can be, challenging efforts to enforce universal standards of accountability. Addressing such issues requires not only clear policies but also a critical examination of the systemic incentives and power dynamics that perpetuate them.

Structural Reforms Needed

Despite these challenges, there are examples of institutions and systems implementing successful anti-corruption measures. Transparency in reporting data to ranking bodies, audits of faculty credentials, and independent peer-review mechanisms are among the best practices adopted to restore integrity. Establishing clear guidelines around faculty hiring, ensuring open access to admissions criteria, and fostering whistleblower protections are also essential remedies.

Moreover, structural reforms at the national or international level can help align incentives with integrity. For example, some countries have established independent quality assurance bodies that decouple performance metrics from funding decisions. Others have prioritized qualitative assessments of research and teaching over purely quantitative rankings, reducing the pressure to game metrics. It should be noted, however, that, like optimizing rankings, transparency and reporting can also be optimized, creating a situation that could be likened to “asking the fox to audit the henhouse”—an important thought that should be kept in mind.

It is crucial to take a global perspective on the complex issue of academic corruption. This includes bringing together scholars and practitioners from diverse disciplines, countries, and career stages to voice their wide range of views, experiences, and concerns while exploring practical remedies and policy measures to promote integrity and accountability.

Academic values—such as academic freedom, autonomy and social responsibility for higher education on the one hand, and academic integrity and responsibility of higher education to society on the other hand—are under increasing pressure everywhere. Attacks on academic values go hand in hand with unethical behavior, corruption, and fraud in authoritarian as well as more democratic systems in both the Global South and Global North. The respect for academic freedom and autonomy, as well as the support by society for higher education, can only hold if those within higher education recognize and take action against corruption and other unethical manifestations in the sector.

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