Mitigating Corruption in Higher Education

Elena Denisova-Schmidt

The lack of academic integrity, fraud, and other forms of unethical behaviour are problems that higher education faces in both developing and developed countries, at mass and elite universities, and public and private institutions. While academic misconduct is not new, massification, internationalization, privatization, digitalization, and commercialization have placed ethics higher on the agenda for many universities (Denisova-Schmidt and De Wit 2017; Denisova-Schmidt 2018, 2019; Bretag 2020).

Corruption in academia is particularly unfortunate, not only because of the high social regard that universities have traditionally enjoyed but also because students— young people in critical formative years—spend a significant amount of time within these educational institutions. How they experience corruption while enrolled might influence their personal and professional future, the future of their country, and much more.

An experiment conducted among bank employees in Switzerland suggests that the business culture of banks supports, and even promotes, dishonest behaviour. Such study outcomes strengthen the assumption that recent financial scandals were caused by a questionable business culture. The authors (Cohn et al. 2014) recruited 128 employees from a large international bank, representing both core business and support units, to participate in an online survey. The subjects were randomly divided into two groups: one where their professional identity was stressed or another where professional identity was ignored. After the priming questions, all of the subjects anonymously performed a coin-tossing task: they were asked to take a coin, toss it ten times and report the outcomes. For each toss, they were able to win up to 20 USD, for a maximum payoff of 200 USD. All subjects were informed before each toss if “heads” or “tails” would win the cash prize, then asked to report their results. The study outcomes reinforce the assertion that this dubious business culture may have

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contributed to the financial scandals of the late 2000s: bank employees were shown to be substantially more dishonest in the professional identity group, which reported on average 58.2% winning coin tosses – significantly higher than both random chance (50%) and the success rate reported by the control group (51.6%). For the higher education sector, these results suggest that a similarly dubious academic culture might also be transferred into the students' future professions. Less qualified people might be responsible for making serious decisions for which they are not properly trained, decisions that might directly or indirectly involve human lives. Indeed, one study found that students attending US medical universities with a strong gift restriction policy are more resistant to the marketing campaigns of pharmaceutical companies that they encounter later in their professional careers (King et al. 2013).

Ethical behaviour in higher education is a very complex issue that may be perceived differently by insiders and outsiders; it is also deeply embedded into larger institutional and cultural contexts that make the problem challenging for comparative analysis.

Cheating and other aspects of misconduct and academic fraud are manifold and widespread. Why do students cheat? Is it because their secondary school preparation was insufficient? Or are they pursuing a university degree as a credential without regard for how they obtain it? Why do faculty members and administrators ignore student misbehaviour? Are they overloaded with other duties and obligations or is teaching no longer important to academic career advancement? What are faculty members doing when they hold a part-time job outside of academia? Are they gaining current, practical experience to share with students to better orient them to the job market? In some fields, such as medicine or music, such employment might not be only an expectation, but a requirement. In other fields, such as management studies and political science, it can raise questions—are these faculty members leveraging their affiliation with a prestigious university to be considered for influential and lucrative positions in politics or industry? How will they manage the research, teaching, and service obligations they have in combination with private employment? Why do some faculty members publish in predatory journals, falsify data, employ professional ghost-writers, or steal papers submitted to them for review and publish them as their own? Plagiarism is widespread in academe at all levels. Were professors actively cheating as students and were they perhaps inadequately oriented to issues of academic integrity? Or are they just under too much pressure to publish to renew their contract or be considered for promotion?

1 Current Trends in Research on Corruption

Corruption is not a new phenomenon; the Bible, the works of Dante, and the plays of Shakespeare all discuss it. Intensive academic studies on corruption are relatively new, however and can be traced back to the early 1990s. This trend is often explained by the end of the Cold War, the rise of democracy, a free press in many countries, the influential role of international organizations like the World Bank and

the International Monetary Fund, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Corruption in centrally planned economies has been exposed, and international organizations have put integrity at the top of their agendas. Transparency International (TI), an international NGO headquartered in Berlin with chapters in more than 100 countries, along with other NGOs has led the fight against corruption globally (Tanzi 1998).

The main issue being raised in corruption studies is the question of why anti-corruption reforms do not work. The answer to this question is associated with three factors—the definition of corruption; the measurement of corruption; and the design and implementation of anti-corruption policies (Ledeneva et al. 2017).

2 Definition of Corruption

One of the first academic definitions of corruption was suggested by Brooks (1970, pp. 56–64), “The intentional misperformance or neglect of a recognized duty, or the unwarranted exercise of power, with the motive of gaining some advantage more or less personal.” One of the first definitions of corruption in higher education was offered by Heyneman, “The abuse of authority for personal as well as material gain” (2004, p. 637). He suggested considering professional misconduct as education corruption.

Today, scholars and practitioners working on corruption in general, and academic corruption in particular, often apply the definition suggested by Transparency International, “Corruption is the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”. It should be noted, however, that corruption is an umbrella term covering multiple activities such as bribery, collusion, conflict of interest, embezzlement, fraud, lobbying, nepotism, patronage, revolving door affiliations, and other activities. The broader research on corruption suggests more than fifty manifestations. Some of these are illegal, while others are not, but all of them are unethical and questionable to some extent.

Defining something seemingly as simple as “bribery” is complicated, as it is not just cash, but rather “the offering, promising, giving, accepting, or soliciting of an advantage as an inducement for an action which is illegal, unethical, or a breach of trust. Inducements can take the form of gifts, loans, fees, rewards, or other advantages such as taxes, services, donations, favours, etc.” (Global Anti-Bribery Guidance 2020). Not all scholars and practitioners working in this field would dare to call plagiarism or student cheating, corruption, nor would they consider universities that add a high “overhead” percentage to third-party grants or students preparing the first draft of their recommendation letter for their professors to sign to be corruption. Nevertheless, whether or not these practices represent corruption, the lack of academic integrity, academic dishonesty, cheating, professional misconduct, or other unethical behaviour, can lead to a decrease in the quality of higher education and increase public distrust in one of the most important societal institutions.

3 Measurement of Corruption

Despite the numerous barriers to researching corruption in higher education, many studies in this field have been carried out. In 2013, Gareth Sweeney, Krina Despota, and Samira Lindner edited TI's Global Corruption Report: Education. In the nearly 500 pages of text, scholars and practitioners showed that corruption exists in academia all over the world and at all levels of education, from primary schools to universities (Sweeney et al. 2013). In addition to media reports, citizen reports, and studies of court records, the data sources for corruption in education include various types of surveys and experiments related to corruption and the perception of corruption. Lab, field, and natural experiments are new trends in the study of corruption in higher education. One of the advantages of these tools is that they address causality. Therefore, their outcomes might be helpful for educators, policymakers, and other practitioners.

Most scholars argue that measuring the true volume of academic corruption is impossible and impractical. Researchers working on corruption in higher education might face additional challenges, especially if they are themselves affiliated with an educational institution. How can they separate their job as faculty members from their study outcomes? What is their motivation? Are they whistle-blowers? Are they the offenders themselves, reflecting on their own experiences? In any case, researchers often have to explain their position in terms of corruption.

4 Design and Implementation of Anti-corruption Policies

There are two main models for analyzing corruption and, therefore, two main approaches to designing and implementing anti-corruption policies—the principal-agent model and the collective action model (Ledeneva et al. 2017).

The first approach considers the principal, who represents the public interest and controls corruption, and the agent, who might be open to corrupt transactions. For example, if a faculty member (the agent) was to demand a bribe from a student (the client), the role of a dean (the principal) would be to intervene and prevent such a transaction. This model assumes that there are any no conflicts of interest between the principal and the agent. In reality, the principal might also be corrupt or have other reasons to allow, ignore, or even support corrupt transactions between the agent and the client. Nevertheless, scholars working with this model suggest tackling the incentives along the chain and changing the organizational structure to eliminate corruption.

The second approach considers all corrupt actions in context. For example, several high-profile politicians have been accused of plagiarism in their Ph.D. dissertations or during their university years. While some politicians “only” lost their academic titles, others also lost their jobs (such as Hungarian President Pál Schmitt in 2012). Some even saw the end of their public careers (e.g. German Defense Minister, Karl-Theodor

zu Guttenberg, in 2011 and German Education Minister, Annette Schavan, in 2013), while other politicians were caught but completely unaffected (Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2006) or only slightly tainted (Former US Vice President Joe Biden in 1987). In societies where some forms of corrupt behaviour are considered the norm, many anti-corruption policies will be not effective.

Contributions to the scholarship of both approaches are crucial, but the models above do not address the scope of corrupt activity, such as problem-solving, especially in the context of weak and ineffective institutions. Looking for a third approach—what problems are solved by corrupt practices—might mitigate corruption more efficiently. The label “fake university,” for example, can be applied to very different situations. U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) established the University of Farmington in Michigan as a trap for international students whom authorities believed were intending to enter the country as students only to remain in the country illegally. Another example, Central European University (CEU), a private university founded in Hungary in 1991 to support social and economic transitions in Eastern European countries and the former Soviet Union, is considered a fake university by the Viktor Orbán administration. While they are both “fake universities” in the classical meaning, the ‘remedies’, if any, to deal with the University of Farmington and the CEU might be completely different.

5 Conclusion

Many educators tend to focus on large-scale corruption. Indeed, the consequences for financial fraud during a building renovation or the purchase of new furniture are more visible and measurable than those for a plagiarized term paper. But the person in charge of procurement was once a student. He or she might be less inclined towards corruption if compromises for personal benefit had been addressed at that earlier stage and a more ethical attitude instilled. By acknowledging this problem—the lack of academic integrity among students—and allocating the necessary resources to mitigate academic misconduct involving students, universities might prevent corruption not only within their institutions but also far beyond.

Misguided silence and ignorance of the problems to maintain the reputation of the academic field, the university, or the entire country can lead to disasters such as Chernobyl (1986) or the COVID-19 pandemic (2020). Remedies for mitigating corruption should not focus on the general lack of academic integrity, but rather target specific practices to both prevent and control. Corruption in higher education might not only be the problem; it could also be the solution, and the reasons behind this should be tackled more precisely.

Corruption in higher education is a global problem. Some academic cultures are simply more researched and more open to those controversial topics than others. Some forms of corruption are more obvious and visible, even to outsiders, but others remain subtle and less visible. This, to some extent, mirrors the discussions between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un on the size of their respective nuclear buttons—the

size does not matter if either of them was to use it, as world order would be destroyed. The same is true about corruption in academia—the acts might differ in size, but with equally serious consequences in all parts of the world.

IAU plays an important role in mitigating corruption: it sets the standards (cf. IAU-MCO Guidelines for an Institutional Code of Ethics in Higher Education), provides a platform for expert discussions (cf. IAU HORIZONS, 22(1), 2017), and maintains the IAU World Higher Education Database (WHED) with comprehensive and reliable information about higher education systems and institutions worldwide—a crucial service in this era of “fake news”.

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