

CORRUPTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CAN QUALITY ASSURANCE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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1. Why is higher education particularly prone to corruption?

Corruption has become an increasingly important concern in higher education policy-making in many countries worldwide. Higher education plays a crucial role in the distribution of life chances and privileged access to the labour market. It enhances salary prospects and provides status in most societies. Given its “gate-keeping function” to access positions of power, authority and prestige (Hallak and Poisson, 2007a), it is even more exposed than other levels of education to risks of corruption and unethical behaviour. The potential for corruption increases when access to higher education is limited and selective, and the monetary and social advantages associated with it are high.

2. What are the typical incidences of corruption in higher education?

Opportunities for corruption are manifold in higher education. They are present during financial transactions (such as grants, subsidies or fellowships), or when contracts of construction or maintenance are attributed. They can arise during the recruitment and deployment of academics (Kranacher, 2013). Opportunities for corruption also typically emerge during admission and examination procedures. Malpractices can be related to professional misconduct such as teacher absenteeism, abuse of power, or illegal fees charged to students and their families. Lack of academic integrity such as plagiarism and falsification of research evidence are another set of ever more frequently encountered malpractices. The development of diploma mills delivering false credentials and diplomas, as well as of accreditation mills issuing fraudulent accreditation (Hallak and Poisson, 2007b) have been observed during recent years. Furthermore, given the potential economic benefits that arise from quality assurance decisions, there is also a strong risk that quality assurance (QA) systems themselves become an object of corruption by providing wrong or distorted evidence on the nature of higher education services.

3. What can QA do to prevent corruption in higher education?

It can be argued that quality assurance has a high potential to prevent corruption, when it is geared towards control and accountability to stakeholders, when it is compulsory, and when it uses accreditation as its main mechanism for quality assurance. Since accreditation applies a standard-based quality model, there are many opportunities for accreditation agencies to insist on the existence of integrity structures, policies, and practices at the level of higher education institutions (HEIs), and to spread existing good practices across the higher education sector. Since accreditation takes place only every three to five years, it is of course not the only solution to corruption; but accreditation can clearly have a strong signalling effect for higher education institutions.

In the area of standards, quality assurance mechanisms can thus insist on reference to values such as “integrity,” “transparency” and “accountability” (Hénard and Mitterle, undated). They can also check the existence of preventive tools or measures such as charts of ethics, codes of conduct, or the existence of appeals and complaints procedure for students. Furthermore, given the increasing incidences of plagiarism, falsification of research results and conflicts of interest in economically high-stakes research, QA can monitor the existence of policies and safeguards to ensure academic integrity, including the existence of anti-plagiarism software.

In the area of governance, quality models can insist on the participation of internal and external stakeholders in decision-making, in particular students. Such approaches to governance have indeed a strong potential to establish a system of checks and balances for collective oversight, and to make corrupt practices at least more difficult. They can also pay attention to issues of transparency and fairness during admission and selection procedures.

In the area of information, another clearly emerging good practice requested in QA systems is the provision of public and transparent access to information on the status of higher education institutions: their academic provision (level, standards and program content) and administrative procedures for application and admission, evaluation and graduation. Indeed, public access to information constitutes indeed certainly one of the strongest deterrents to corrupt practices.

4. Can quality assurance itself become resilient against corruption?

Quality assurance systems do not form a monolithic practice across countries. Given their widespread and truly worldwide occurrence, they cover many different realities (Martin and Stella, 2007). Therefore, the question arises as to the most promising options to set up a transparent quality assurance system that has the best chance to stand up against possible attempts of corruption.

It can be argued that there are already existing codes of good practices which guide to a large extent the procedures used by quality assurance agencies. The most important elements are the existence of transparent and publicly available standard systems, the careful choice of external reviewers with transparent policies on conflict of interest, the use of multiple information sources to construct the evidence for accreditation decisions and the reliance on a collective judgement, the public disclosure of the accreditation results, legal frameworks that ensure the independence of accreditation decisions, and the existence of a solid appeal procedure. When all these elements are in place, it can be argued that there is a relatively good chance that there are enough checks and balances in the system to ensure that quality assurance is based on evidence rather than influence and unethical behaviour.

5. How can QA agencies and HEIs work together to best prevent corruption?

In order to make quality assurance more effective in the prevention and detection of corruption, it is, however, evident that expectations expressed in standard systems for accreditation need to be translated by the authorities of higher education institutions into procedures of internal quality assurance (IQA), for which they are responsible. One can certainly argue that external quality assurance (EQA) systems can be only as effective as they are supported by relevant institutional policies, structures, and practices, such as policies on academic integrity, ethics committees, and appeal procedures. Indeed, it needs to be acknowledged that HEIs are the main actors in the prevention and identification of risks of corruption and malpractices, provided they are given adequate guidance and resources to translate national policies into institutional practices.

Where to find additional information:

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