

# Can Academic Corruption Be Eradicated?

Liz Reisberg

Corruption exists in nearly every public and private enterprise in every country worldwide. Where there are private benefits to be acquired, it seems inevitable that there will be individuals who exploit opportunities for personal advantage by cheating, undermining the integrity of the systems that they are abusing by their actions. Higher education is not immune. The 2020 [report](#) of the Russian Academy of Sciences documenting the retraction of 800 journal papers submitted by Russian scholars is a shocking example of just how serious and ubiquitous the problem is.

In *Corruption in Higher Education – Global Challenges and Responses*, edited by Elena Denisova-Schmidt, scholars in countries throughout the world suggest that corruption in higher education results from poorly designed systems; students and professors who do not fully understand what constitutes unethical behavior; a lack of consequences; individuals who find themselves in difficult situations where “shortcuts” seem to be the only solution; and individuals tempted by an easier path to personal advancement. The lack of clarity over the boundary between ethical and unethical, or of recognition of the circumstances that encourage corruption in different contexts complicate the effectiveness of any policy or procedure designed to protect against academic corruption.

Clearly, not enough is being done in many countries or at many institutions to orient students and faculty to accepted international standards of academic integrity or explain why these standards are important. In some cases, transgressions are committed innocently, or because corrupt behaviors are observed in others without consequence and subsequently “normalized.” While some behaviors are clearly wrong, they cannot be addressed without a better understanding of why they occur. Incentives to cheat are often great, while the consequences of cheating are few.

## Shortcuts and Perverse Incentives

Perhaps one of the most important conclusions to be drawn from the book is that corruption will not be eradicated simply by punishing individuals who are found guilty of unethical practice. Many systems present perverse structural incentives to cheat or overlook cheating. Such is the case in Armenia, Lithuania, Russia, and Ukraine, where instructors find themselves facing the dilemma of either ignoring cheating or dismissing students whose fees sustain the university where they are employed.

Massification has certainly contributed to the problem. The result of expanded access has meant that more students enter higher education underprepared. Where academic support services are lacking, there is an incentive to cheat in order to succeed. Contract cheating, when students purchase essays to turn in as their own, is one of the consequences. In some cases, students resort to this due to pressure to work. Papers for purchase are easily found online. Agencies that sell papers and essays often do so blatantly, sometimes located close to a campus. “Essay mills” serve not only the needs of students who purchase them, but the authors who write them. In Kenya, for example, university graduates often resort to selling essays online as a result of limited legitimate employment opportunities in Kenya’s weak economy. The government of Kenya would confront a greater problem of unemployment if there was any concerted effort to crack down on the “academic writing” industry.

The growing number of university graduates has to some extent devalued the qualification. In many countries, a university degree has become a baseline qualification even for a position that does not require higher-level skills. The result is a market segment servicing people interested in acquiring the credential without investing the time or effort to earn it. For these individuals, it is tempting to purchase a degree from a degree

## Abstract

Corruption is pervasive in higher education worldwide, the result of a confluence of circumstances that make it attractive due to potential rewards and limited consequences. Many higher education systems unintentionally support perverse incentives for the proliferation of corruption. This article cites examples of corruption highlighted in a recently published volume, *Corruption in Higher Education – Global Challenges and Responses*.

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mill that will provide credentials for any degree, at any level, for a fraction of the cost of study and virtually no commitment of time. Despite the efforts of UNESCO and other organizations, it has proven impossible to create a complete database of enterprises contributing to this type of fraud.

### **Commercial Ventures Address a Need**

When academic employment and promotion depend on number of publications, individuals will inevitably resort to predatory journals. The proliferation of predatory journals responds to this need but has also complicated the task of distinguishing predatory from legitimate publications. Attempts to develop “blacklists” are stymied by the lack of resources necessary to review a multitude of existing journals.

Predatory conferences represent a similar challenge. Organizers have found a receptive audience, particularly among young scholars who need to build their CV or others who are flattered by an invitation to present. There is also the appeal of obtaining university funds to travel, with the result that even scholars from elite institutions participate. Unfortunately, all manner of institutions host these events, valuing them as a source of revenue.

Finally, resourceful “third parties” act as intermediaries to place prospective students at universities abroad (most often in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States). While this practice treads a fine ethical line depending on whose interests are paramount, the incentives to all parties are powerful—for the student and student’s family, it cuts short a complicated process of sorting through the overabundance of international options; for universities, it brings in full-paying students with little recruitment effort; for the agents who act as intermediaries, the arrangement is profitable.

### **Remedies**

Eliminating corruption in higher education will require efforts on multiple fronts. Perhaps most important is the need to orient teachers and students about what constitutes academic corruption and to address the underlying issues that encourage unethical behavior. Where students do not have the luxury of dedicating themselves to full-time study, mechanisms are needed to relieve financial pressure. When students struggle to balance time for study and the need to hold a job, there is a temptation to make efficient use of time by cheating. Additionally, the line between the financial, professional, or academic interests of individuals who hold public office or otherwise influence public policy is often blurred. Unless conflicts of interest can be identified and prevented, corruption will flourish.

A critical issue that is only partially addressed in the book is the problem created by the way success is measured. As long as progress to degree is measured predominantly by exams and papers, cheat sheets, impersonations, technology, and essay mills will offer an appealing path to needed results. Alternative mechanisms to measure student learning could eliminate many of these shortcuts to graduation. Likewise, if success for faculty is measured quantitatively, then illicit options will remain attractive. There are fewer opportunities for corruption when excellence in teaching and service to the institution are valued more.

### **Conclusion**

Higher education is fundamental to the creation of the highly qualified human capital needed in today’s knowledge-based economies. Citizens in nations at all stages of development need to trust universities to protect the integrity and quality of their “output.”

One cannot read this book without being impressed by the degree of innovation that has produced so many forms of academic corruption. If only these creative efforts could be employed more ethically, how much greater the achievement of the world’s universities would be! ▲

*Liz Reisberg is a consultant in international higher education and a research fellow at the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, US. Email: reisberg@gmail.com.*