

Corruption: A Key Challenge to Internationalization

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A specter of corruption is haunting the global campaign toward higher education internationalization. An overseas degree is increasingly valuable, so it is not surprising that commercial ventures have found opportunities on the internationalization landscape. New private actors have entered the sector, with the sole goal of making money. Some of them are less than honorable. Some universities look at internationalization as a contribution to the financial “bottom line,” in an era of financial cutbacks. The rapidly expanding private higher education sector globally is largely for-profit. In a few cases, such as Australia and increasingly the United Kingdom, national policies concerning higher education internationalization tilt toward earning income for the system.

Countries whose academic systems suffer from elements of corruption are increasingly involved in international higher education—sending large numbers of students abroad, establishing relationships with overseas universities, and other activities. Corruption is not limited to countries that may have a reputation for less than fully circumspect academic practices, but that problem occurs globally. Several scandals have recently been widely reported in the United States, including the private unaccredited “Tri-Valley University,” a sham

institution that admitted and collected tuition from foreign students. That institution did not require them to attend class, but rather funneled them into the labor market, under the noses of US immigration authorities. In addition, several public universities have been caught admitting students, with substandard academic qualifications. Quality-assurance agencies in the United Kingdom have uncovered problems with “franchised” British-degree programs, and similar scandals have occurred in Australia. A prominent example is the University of Wales, which was the second-largest university in the United Kingdom, with 70,000 students enrolled in 130 colleges around the world. It had to close its highly profitable degree validation program, which accounted for nearly two-thirds of institutional revenue.

With international higher education now a multibillion dollar industry around the world, individuals, countries, and institutions depending on income, prestige, and access—it is not surprising that corruption is a growing problem. If something is not done to ensure probity in international relationships in higher education, an entire structure—built on trust, a commitment to mutual understanding, and benefits for students and researchers—a commitment built informally over decades will collapse. There are signs that it is already in deep trouble.

EXAMPLES AND IMPLICATIONS

A serious and unsolved problem is the prevalence of unscrupulous agents and recruiters funneling unqualified students to universities worldwide. A recent example was featured in Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* (June 26, 2012) of an agent in China caught on video, offering to write admissions essays and to present other

questionable help in admission to prominent British universities. No one knows the extent of the problem, although consistent news reports indicate that it is widespread, particularly in countries that send large numbers of students abroad, including China and India. Without question, agents now receive millions of dollars in commissions paid by the universities and, in some egregious cases, money from the clients as well. In Nottingham University's case the percentage of students recruited through agents has increased from 19 percent of the intake in 2005 to 25 percent in 2011, with more than £1 million going to the agents.

Altered and fake documents have long been a problem in international admissions. Computer design and technology exacerbate it. Fraudulent documents have become a minor industry in some parts of the world, and many universities are reluctant to accept documents from institutions that have been tainted with incidents of counterfeit records. For example, a number of American universities no longer accept applications from some Russian students—because of widespread perceptions of fraud, document tampering, and other problems. Document fraud gained momentum due to commission-based agents who have an incentive to ensure that students are “packaged” with impressive credentials, as their commissions depend on successful student placement. Those responsible for checking the accuracy of transcripts, recommendations, and degree certificates face an increasingly difficult task. Students who submit valid documentation are placed at a disadvantage since they are subjected to extra scrutiny.

Examples of tampering with and falsifying results of the Graduate Record Examination and other commonly required international examinations used for admissions have resulted in the nullifying of scores, and even cancelling

examinations in some countries and regions, as well as rethinking whether on-line testing is practical. This situation has made it more difficult for students to apply to foreign universities and has made the task of evaluating students for admission more difficult.

Several countries, including Russia and India, have announced that they will be using the *Times Higher Education* and Academic Ranking of World Universities (Shanghai rankings), as a way of determining the legitimacy of foreign universities for recognizing foreign degrees, determining eligibility for academic collaborations, and other aspects of international higher education relations. This is unfortunate, since many excellent academic institutions are not included in these rankings, which mostly measure research productivity. No doubt, Russia and India are concerned about the quality of foreign partners and find the rankings convenient.

Several “host” countries have tightened up rules and oversight of cross-border student flows in response to irregularities and corruption. The US Department of State announced in June 2012 that visa applicants from India would be subjected to additional scrutiny as a response to the “Tri-Valley scandal.” Earlier both Australia and Britain changed rules and policy. Corruption is making internationalization more difficult for the entire higher education sector. It is perhaps significant that continental Europe seems to have been less affected by shady practices—perhaps in part because international higher education is less commercialized and profit driven.

The Internet has become the “Wild West” of academic misrepresentation and chicanery. It is easy to set up an impressive Web site and exaggerate the quality or lie about an institution. Some institutions claim accreditation that does

not exist. There are even “accreditation mills” to accredit universities that pay a fee. A few include pictures of impressive campuses that are simply photo-shopped from other universities.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

With international higher education now big business and with commercial gain an ever-increasing motivation for international initiatives, the problems mentioned are likely to persist. However, a range of initiatives can ameliorate the situation. The higher education community can recommit to the traditional “public good” values of internationalization, although current funding challenges may make this difficult in some countries. The International Association of Universities’ recent report, “Affirming Academic Values in Internationalization of Higher Education,” is a good start. The essential values of the European Union’s Bologna Initiatives are also consistent with the best values of internationalization. Nottingham University, mentioned earlier, provides transparency, concerning its use of agents. It supervises those it hires and, in general, adheres to best practice—as do some other universities in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

Accreditation and quality assurance are essential for ensuring that basic quality is recognized. Agencies and the international higher education community must ensure that universities were carefully evaluated and that the results of assessment are easily available to the public and the international stakeholders.

Governmental, regional, and international agencies must coordinate their efforts and become involved in maintaining standards and protecting the image

of the higher education sector. Contradictions abound. For example, the United States Department of State's Education USA seeks to protect the sector, while the Department of Commerce sees higher education just as an export commodity. Government agencies in the United Kingdom and Australia seem also to be mainly pursuing commercial interests.

Consciousness-raising about ethics and good practice in international higher education and awareness of emerging problems and continuing challenges deserve continuing attention. Prospective students and their families, institutional partners considering exchanges and research, and other stakeholders must be more sophisticated and vigilant concerning decision making. The Boston College Center for International Higher Education's Corruption Monitor is the only clearinghouse for information, relating directly to corrupt practices; additional sources of information and analysis will be helpful.

The first step in solving a major challenge to higher education internationalization is recognition of the problem itself. The higher education community itself is by no means united; and growing commercialization makes some people reluctant to act in ways that may threaten profits. There are individuals within the academic community who lobby aggressively to legitimize dubious practices. Yet, if nothing is done, the higher education sector worldwide will suffer and the impressive strides taken toward internationalization will be threatened.

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