

and this becomes obvious also when looking at the strategic plans of Romanian universities. However, as often stated in closed national debates, the rationales for this consensus are mostly linked with the opportunity to attract more non-EU, fee-paying students.

#### A NEED FOR POLICY COHERENCE

Romania can be seen as a laboratory for how various international processes, norms, and institutions have changed the higher education landscape in 25 years of democratic transition. Despite its openness to international developments, the public debate and ownership over substantive reforms remain illusory, and that is partially due to the double discourse used by decision-makers in order to avoid international stigma or lose votes internally. Without a sound public debate on current challenges and their solutions, drawing on existing good practice and taking into account international commitments, Romania's higher education sector will remain vulnerable, instead of bringing a solution for sustainable socioeconomic development. ■

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## Institutional Corruption in Russian Universities

NATALIYA L. RUMYANTSEVA AND  
ELENA DENISOVA-SCHMIDT

*Nataliya L. Rumyantseva is a senior lecturer at the University of Greenwich, United Kingdom. E-mail: N.Rumyantseva@greenwich.ac.uk. Elena Denisova-Schmidt is a lecturer at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland, and an Edmond J. Safra Network Fellow at Harvard University, United States. E-mail: elena.denisova-schmidt@unisg.ch.*

Russia is about to become an academic superpower, which makes it very successful at least in the context of the BRIC countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China. After various effective reforms, including the Bologna process and the modernization of admissions procedures, the Russian government is now working hard on remedying corruption in higher education. Why is corruption in this sector so prevalent? In this article, we argue that the improper dependencies of all the involved actors make corruption possible. Improper dependencies are mutually dependent relationships that lead to unhealthy or unconstructive outcomes. Young people without an academic degree have few chances on the job market in Russia. The faculty is under pressure from the university administration, to retain the current cohort of students at all costs. The administration is under budgetary pressure from the Ministry of Education

and Science at public universities and from the students themselves at private universities.

#### DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS AND “UNTEACHABLE” STUDENTS

Many Russian universities are currently facing difficult times. The continuing decline in the birth rate, taking place since the 1990s, has inevitably resulted in a decrease in the numbers of university applicants. The number of universities, however, remain high, despite the obvious demographic crisis. In the 2014–2015 academic year, there were 950 universities in Russia, including 548 state and 402 private schools and, in addition, more than 1,600 regional branches. Only the most prestigious universities—about 30 to 40 institutions throughout the country that receive generous support from the Ministry of Education and Science—are in a position to be selective with their admissions.

The remaining mass higher education institutions are left to compete for students, who are often not qualified to carry on with university-level studies, not invested in receiving a high-quality education, and looking instead to get by until they finish their diploma—however, nominal their actual learning may be. The total number of students in Russia is very high. Each year, almost 80 percent of all secondary school graduates go to a university, and almost all of them graduate—a number that has remained constant since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

#### THE INSTITUTIONAL TRAP

These mismatched trends produce a power imbalance, where universities need their students more than the students need the universities. Public universities receive their budget allocation according to the number of students. If they expel students, they need to return the money they received from the state for those students. This is hardly possible, because the money is already covering personnel and other costs. It might also mean that, in the next academic year, the budget will be cut by the state and the universities will need to dismiss faculty or staff, or close some programs. Private universities are completely dependent on their students' fees. With some exceptions, those universities would not be able to exist without their students. This is further complicated by the fact that, formally, universities are the gatekeepers of the official credentials, endorsed by the government, and are responsible for raising quality of higher education. The conflicting goals of the empowered students and the disempowered universities create a further problem of clashing interests. This is where improper dependencies are essentially formed. Universities, as a result, are squeezed between a rock (students' preferences) and a hard place, to appear legitimate and meet governmental requirements, which effectively places their day-to-day operations in an institutional trap.

**INSTITUTIONAL ADAPTATION AND CORRUPTION**

Survival and self-preservation can be powerful motivating factors. Institutions can be easily propelled by these forces to create methods to adapt to their difficulties. Faced with this challenge, which threatens their own organizational survival and personal financial stability, university faculty members have no choice than to lower their standards informally, while projecting outward quality in order to satisfy their assessors. The lowering of standards creates a breeding ground for cynicism, professional disappointment, and resentment toward students as well as the government, which is unable to regulate the situation effectively.

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Once the standards are lowered and cynicism is allowed to flourish, a fertile ground has been created for academic corruption. If it is no longer possible to derive professional satisfaction from intellectual engagement with the students, then the fact that the students can be used as a source of additional income provides a certain amount of consolation. Each individual faculty member has a choice to take part or not to take part in this culture. Those who do not participate will be coerced to abide by the silent agreement, to lower their standards. Those wishing to remain active participants have the opportunity to supplement their income—average Russian academic salaries are quite low—and recalibrate the institutional power imbalance in their favor, albeit only at a personal level. The majority, thus, forms an academic conspiracy, which is a very powerful structure that sustains the existence of the individual faculty members in both financial and psychological terms—and naturally punishes those who do not participate willingly.

**WHO IS GUILTY AND WHAT CAN BE DONE?**

Students, or at least some of them, are guilty of lacking the proper motivation when entering higher education. It might be unfair to expect this from very young or sometimes even underage people in a society in which blue-collar workers have lost their former prestige, and the system of vocational education is almost destroyed. Disappointed, disillusioned, and overloaded academics have a choice with regard to their individual involvement in obvious monetary corruption or covert nonmonetary corruption, including ac-

ademic collusion—by ignoring the lack of academic integrity among their students. They may even not be fully aware of how inappropriate their actions are. As most academics in a given university are also graduates from the same institution, they simply end up repeating the familiar patterns they have learned, while being students themselves. The government, while striving to boost the international legitimacy of the higher education system, is disregarding the natural demographic trends and the quality of the secondary school graduates. Equally, however, each individual actor, including the government, is a victim of the overall institutional trap and the burgeoning corruption grounded in its distorted links and relationships. The victim status perpetuates the sense of helplessness, and the belief that the “citadel” is more powerful than its members. ■

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## California and the Future of Public Higher Education

**SIMON MARGINSON**

*Simon Marginson was the 2014 Clark Kerr Lecturer on Higher Education at the University of California. He is professor of International Education at the UCL Institute of Education, University College London, and joint editor-in-chief of Higher Education. E-mail: s.marginson@ioe.ac.uk.*

California has been at the leading edge of modernity since World War II. New social trends, tendencies, and tensions tend to show up in California before they spread to everywhere else. For example, in an extraordinary 14-year period, California invented university student power (Berkeley 1964), hippies and the collectivist counter-culture (San Francisco 1967)—followed by the high individualist tax revolt, in the form of Proposition 13, which was passed by a state referendum in 1978 and capped local government taxes and spending. All of these movements went on to sweep across the whole world, and, in some respects that are still with us. The 1980s and 1990s phenomena of Silicon Valley and Steve Jobs—also still with us, is not to mention the continuous influence of California’s film and television industry.

In the past 60 years, California has also led the world in policy and provision of higher education and university-based science, while at the same time leading the evolution of ideas about university education. California is unmatched in its concentration of high-quality public campuses (for example, University of California, Berkeley; University of