
The role of quality assurance and accreditation agencies in reducing corruption in education: results from a global study

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As part of their leadership role in quality assurance, in 2017 the Council for Higher Education Association's International Quality Group (CHEA/CIQG) commissioned a global study of accreditation and quality assurance agencies (AQABs) for higher education (HE) to investigate what actions they are taking to identify and respond to corruption in the HE sector. The study built on an advisory statement created the year before, informed by a panel of experts convened by IIEP / UNESCO and CIQG (IIEP & CIQG 2016). The advisory statement set out recent examples of corruption in HE and suggested actions that could be taken by different stakeholders to discourage or reduce such conduct.

The scope of the 2017-18 study was to explore responses to corruption in different parts of the world under six categories of HE:

- Regulation
- Teaching
- Admissions and recruitment
- Student assessment
- Credentials and qualifications
- Research and academic publishing

The definition of corruption adopted for the study was based on a rather narrower interpretation than that given in the advisory statement: "dishonest practices ... undermining the quality and credibility of higher education around the world" (IIEP & CIQG 2016: 1), by focusing on deliberate "actions of individuals or groups rather than misconduct through accident, incompetence or ignorance" (Glendinning et al 2018: 6).

By AQABs we: "... include organizations that

- *conduct institution-wide audits to evaluate quality assurance systems and standards;*
- *evaluate specific subjects or programs for disciplinary rigor, quality and standards;*
- *accredit programs leading to professional qualifications or license to practice*
- *provide oversight of research institutions;*
- *focus on quality assurance and standards at specific levels of education;*
- *are established to provide access to sources of funding for institutions and their students"* (Glendinning et al 2018: 6).

The study was undertaken by a team of three researchers from Coventry University, the authors of this paper. Ethical approval was granted for the research by the University. A review of relevant literature continued throughout the study period, with non-traditional sources such as blogs, press and media evidence featuring prominently in the resources referenced. Mainly quantitative data was captured using an on-line questionnaire, targeting over 300 AQABs. More detailed information was captured through semi-structured



interviews with key players in HE quality assurance and experts in the higher education, research and academic publishing in different parts of the world.

A total of 69 valid questionnaire responses were collected. In addition 17 semi-structured interviews and a further 5 less formal discussions were conducted either face-to-face, via Skype or by email. The interviews were audio-recorded with permission from participants, then later transcribed. It was possible to conduct the whole data collection process in English, given the language skills, expertise and roles of the people involved. Documentary evidence was also analysed, to explore policies and evidence of activities and progress in different countries in addressing corruption.

Questionnaire responses were anonymised before analysis. However, with their permission, interview participants were identified in the final report. Thematic analysis was used for the qualitative data and descriptive statistical analysis was conducted on quantitative data. A draft copy of the relevant parts of the report was sent to those interviewed to allow for corrections and updates.

Very few of the AQABs that responded expressed serious concerns about the types of corruption under the scope of the study. Some respondents said that responsibility for identifying and dealing with corruption lay elsewhere (typically with HEIs or government departments). Some said national legislation or local policies had eradicated such corruption. However these reported experiences do not align well with evidence from the literature that demonstrates the ubiquity and variety of corruption in higher education and research, across almost every country globally.

It was encouraging that some AQABs respondents expressed awareness of the threats from corruption to quality and standards and some ABABs are proactively implementing strategies to address corruption, either directly or via partner organisations (including examples from Nigeria (O'Malley 2017a), India (Varghese 2017), Russia (Denisova-Schmidt 2017), Lithuania (Glendinning et al 2018: 52), Germany (Weber-Wulff 2016), Kosovo (ORCA 2017), Australia (TEQSA 2017), UK (QAA 2017) and Ireland (Government of Ireland 2018)).

In addition to many good practice examples provided by interview participants and from literature, many examples came to light about the scale and nature of corruption in some countries. Examples include the discovery of over 5,000 fully plagiarised PhD theses in Russia by the group Dissernet (interviews), serious sexual harassment of students in Uganda (McKie 2018) and the revelation that about 60% of HEIs in India have no oversight or checks for quality and standards (interview). Fortunately, in both Russia and India there are signs that these problems are beginning to be addressed.

The recommendations to AQABs arising from the research include the need for proactivity in engaging with HEIs to help strengthen their responses to corrupt practices, such as appointing staff or admitting students with fake qualifications. There is also great value in AQABs networking and communicating with other agencies and organisations in their locality, including NGOs, to better understand and respond to threats from corruption, as exemplified by Lithuania's quality assurance agency working closely with the ombuds-person interviews).

It is worth reflecting that corruption in higher education is not confined to countries that rate low on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI, TI nd). Recent examples of corruption in HE from countries perceived to be relatively low in corruption, including Sweden (Abbot 2016), Japan (Forrest 2018), UK (Watson 2017), Australia (Besser & Cronau 2015), USA (Fox News 2018), remind us that all nations and their AQABs need to be vigilant in identifying and reducing corruption affecting higher education, whatever form it takes.

This research provides important new evidence about strengths and weaknesses of AQABs in helping to fight corruption and malpractice in higher education. It is anticipated that the findings about the global nature of corruption in higher education will encourage AQABs to be more open about the problems in their community. Most of the respondents indicated that they would like to communicate with other AQABs to more effectively serve their higher education providers.

There are also crucial messages to other players in HE, not least national and local governments and professional bodies responsible for establishing and resourcing AQABs, about the dangers of ignoring corruption and the need for adequate funding and support for AQABs. Responsibilities of HE institutions in instituting robust internal quality assurance processes are highlighted as a critical component of the overall QA regime for addressing malpractice, eliminating corruption and encouraging integrity in education and research.

The final word must be about individual responsibility, whether a member of an audit panel, a lecturer or institutional leader, a student leader or fresher, the integrity of individual members of a community influences that of the community as a whole. We are all responsible for fighting corruption in HE to protect the value and quality of education and research provided by our HE institutions.

Keywords: academic integrity, corruption, quality assurance, accreditation, higher education providers.

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