

# Advisory Statement for Effective International Practice

Combating Corruption and Enhancing Integrity:  
A Contemporary Challenge for the Quality and  
Credibility of Higher Education



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**Combatting Corruption and Enhancing Integrity:  
A Contemporary Challenge for the Quality and Credibility of Higher Education**



*Absenteeism, Appropriation, Bribery, Cheating, Corruption, Deceit, Embezzlement, Extortion, Favouritism, Fraud, Graft, Harassment, Impersonation ...*

An ABC of dishonest practices – usually referred to more coyly as misconduct or misrepresentation – is undermining the quality and credibility of higher education around the world. We shall use ‘corruption’ as a general term to designate such malpractice and make the academic operations of higher education institutions (HEIs) our primary focus.

Alarmed by the increasing frequency of press reports on corrupt practices in the higher education sector, the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) and the International Quality Group of the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA/CIQG) joined forces to convene an expert meeting in Washington, DC, on 30/31 March 2016. Corruption in higher education is a dynamic phenomenon. The Expert Group is publishing this Advisory Statement as a wake-up call to higher education to fight academic corruption more aggressively. The sector’s quality assurance systems must take a leading role in this battle.

IIEP has longstanding experience of research and capacity development in the areas of ethics and corruption in education as well as of internal and external quality assurance in higher education at the international level. IIEP also acts as a clearinghouse on strategies to combat corruption in education and in developing quality assurance systems in line with national needs.

CHEA/CIQG serves as a thought leader on international quality assurance issues and policy, a convener of academics and others engaged in international quality assurance and a forum for dialogue and deliberation on vital quality issues.

The Washington meeting followed an IIEP Policy Forum on Planning Higher Education Integrity in Paris in March 2015, where the role of quality assurance in combatting corruption was stressed. Its work was partly inspired by an earlier Advisory Statement, *Toward Effective Practice: Discouraging Degree Mills in Higher Education*, issued by UNESCO and CHEA after a similar process in 2009. As that Statement observed: ‘Degree mills are part of an emerging academic corruption that, unfortunately, is accompanying the growth of access and participation in higher education worldwide.’

Against this background the discussion naturally began by looking at the crucial role that quality assurance should play in combatting corruption and enhancing academic integrity. It became clear, however, that although effective quality assurance is a central element in addressing a growing problem, it cannot do the job alone. Corruption affecting the integrity of universities’ academic operations occurs both upstream and downstream from the work of quality assurance

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bodies. Upstream it can infect government and society generally, downstream it can be present at all levels in higher education institutions. Action on a broad front is needed to attack the problem.

### **A wake-up call**

This Advisory Statement is a wake-up call to higher education worldwide – particularly to quality assurance bodies. HEIs, governments, employers and societies generally, in both developed and developing countries, are far too complacent about the growth of corrupt practices, either assuming that these vices occur somewhere else or turning a deaf ear to rumours of malpractice in their own organizations. It took bravery for a Chinese scholar to describe the corruption in his nation’s HE system as a ‘malignant tumour’. Similar courage is required of academics and institutional leaders in other countries, both developed and developing.

At a time when scarcely a week goes by without public figures running for cover after leaks about their involvement in bribery, stashing money offshore, tax evasion, sexual harassment and suchlike, why should higher education try to swim against the tide?

One reason is that in most domains university graduates will provide the future leadership of their communities and drive their development. If they experience corrupt behaviour as a normal part of their student days they are less likely to avoid such practices later in life. A doctor who was given police protection after exposing a massive cheating ring involving medical school entrance exams in India commented: ‘The next generation of doctors is being taught to cheat and deceive even before they enter the classroom.’

Another reason for paying special attention to corruption in higher education is that the needs of societies cannot be met if graduates do not have the competencies that HEIs purport to have given them. The health sector is not the only field where people’s lives are endangered if practitioners do not have the knowledge and skills attested in their degree certificates from accredited HEIs. Corruption in higher education has a high cost to society. Yet we hear politicians – even heads of state – urging the importance of expanding higher education while being shameless about the phony PhDs they hold themselves!

### **Guidelines**

The aim of this Advisory Statement is to provide some guidelines to the various stakeholders for effective international practice in combatting corruption in higher education – with a special focus on the role that quality assurance should play. It includes a matrix that lists some of the major issues for action and indicates which stakeholders should address them.

In the matrix, alongside the regulation of higher education systems and public awareness, we include five key academic functions: the organization of teaching, admissions, examinations and assessment, degree awarding and certification, and research theses/publications. We restrict our focus on research to graduate degrees and publications. While there is huge potential for corruption in the awarding and management of research contracts this is not within the scope of this statement. Neither are the broader financial operations of HEIs.



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Among the seven sets of stakeholders identified in the matrix, three merit special comment. First, while students can be perpetrators of corruption, they are also vital allies in fighting it. They have a greater interest in seeing their HEI maintain a reputation for probity and quality than anyone, since they will be its alumni for life. Furthermore, involving students in processes aimed at eliminating corruption also encourages greater transparency in academic processes. This is another important weapon for promoting integrity. Sunlight is still a good disinfectant!

Second, academics have the key role in preventing corruption within HEIs since their work is central to the five academic functions that we address in the matrix. The large majority of academics undoubtedly prefer to conduct their work with integrity. Two forces, however, push them in the other direction. The increasing proportion of part-time academic appointments in developed countries and the paltry salaries paid in many developing countries lessen the emotional commitment of teaching staff to their HEIs. Instructors who need several jobs to make ends meet can hardly be blamed for not going out on a limb to defend a particular institution and its reputation. Pressures from institutional administrations can also undermine academic rigor. Unqualified nurses may be graduated anyway because an HEI is reluctant to put at risk the income stream that these (usually international) students represent. The academics involved dare not blow the whistle for fear of losing their jobs.

Finally, the press and civil society organizations can play a helpful role in exposing and thus discouraging corruption. This can include the social media – although their role can cut both ways. Some countries with a history of corruption have a feisty press that likes to report on individual and institutional misbehaviour, Nigeria being a good example. In others, however, the press is too docile to speak truth to power.

Two comments are in order about our international focus. First, we concentrate on academic issues that are relevant to HEIs in most countries. In US HEIs, for example, the multi-billion dollar intercollegiate athletics industry provides many incentives for academic corruption, but this is less of an issue internationally. Second, attitudes to the morality of particular practices vary around the world. In some parts of the world what others call plagiarism may be considered merely a way of honouring authorities by copying their work. Elsewhere, what others would deprecate as nepotism may be regarded locally as fulfilling a duty to create job opportunities for relatives and friends. The concept of ‘conflict of interest’ is foreign to many countries.

Today, however, millions of students move around the world to study. They need to know in advance the behaviours that their institution considers to be dishonest. Many students have blighted their careers by being sanctioned for practices that were habits back home.

### **Quality assurance**

Quality assurance, a central theme of this Advisory Statement, is the nexus between attempts to fight corruption both upstream and downstream. We distinguish between external quality assurance (EQA), conducted by agencies that work with systems of HEIs, and internal quality assurance (IQA) organized within each HEI. In mature systems the EQA process, which ‘assures’ quality, relies heavily on the IQA arrangements, which ‘ensure’ quality, in making judgments about an institution.

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The vital requirement, for assuring quality in general and for fighting corruption in particular, is for HEIs to foster an internal quality culture, of which an IQA framework is a key manifestation. In the Seven [Quality Principles](#) articulated by CHEA/CIQG in 2015, the first stresses that ‘assuring and achieving quality in higher education is the primary responsibility of higher education providers and their staff’.

External Quality Assurance can be a helpful support to the IQA system. But we note that a general trend worldwide has been to slim down EQA activities as HE systems mature. Such ‘risk-based’ EQA processes align the frequency and intensity of their scrutiny of an HEI to an assessment of how likely it is, on past form, to develop quality weaknesses. The risk of corruption is rarely an explicit feature of this assessment. Indeed, just as the external auditors of corporations involved in major fraud cases are often caught flat-footed, so the EQA bodies of HEIs discovered to be egregiously corrupt rarely gave warnings of the problems ahead. Moreover, although most countries now have EQA bodies, working with them is sometimes voluntary, as in India. Sound IQA systems remain the best defence against quality weaknesses and corrupt practices.

Upstream of quality assurance arrangements are governments, which often have the powers to license HEIs or grant degree-awarding status and also to establish the EQA body for their jurisdiction. These functions offer numerous opportunities for corruption that can poison the integrity of the whole HE system. Licensing HEIs in return for bribes or packing the governing body of an EQA agency with individuals in conflict of interest are just two real examples.

If the probity of the upstream arrangements is high then the onus for preventing corruption passes through the EQA agencies downstream to the HEIs with their complex functions and multiple stakeholders. Two contemporary developments make their task harder. First, the huge appetite for higher education among the young populations of the developing world puts great pressures on admissions processes. Second, the steadily developing sophistication and borderless nature of information and communications technology (ICT) has expanded the opportunities for fraudsters in all walks of life.

### **New HE providers**

A final trend to note here is the growing volume of new provision of higher learning that is – and for good reasons usually wishes to remain – outside the purview of established HE systems. Some of this provision, like MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), begins as informal but later attempts to offer some sort of credential such as open badges. Much of this provision meets a real need and would benefit from EQA that could provide assurance of legitimacy and probity, thus distinguishing it from the shadowy world of degree mills. CHEA/CIQG is providing such an EQA service through its [Quality Platform](#) that was pilot tested with a Chinese provider in 2015.

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## Examples of corruption and how to prevent it



The following examples of corrupt practices and preventive actions may assist in the fight against academic corruption. They are offered simply as guidance and provide an array of initiatives that governments, quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions, faculty and staff, students, the press, civil society organizations, employers, and professional bodies may wish to consider. Additional specific illustrations of corrupt practices in the education sector can be found on IIEP's ETICO platform of resources (<http://etico.iiep.unesco.org>).

### *1. Combatting corruption in the regulation of higher education systems*

#### **Some examples of associated corrupt practices:**

- Licensing institutions, granting degree-awarding powers or accrediting programmes in return for bribes or favours.
- Appointing unqualified individuals or those with conflicts of interest to regulatory bodies and HEI boards.
- Appointing CEOs of HEIs without due process.
- Political or commercial interference in the decisions of quality assurance bodies.

#### **Preventive actions:**

1. Create transparent processes for appointments to governing councils of all state bodies involved in the regulation and administration of higher education.
2. Exclude individuals in conflict of interest as members of quality assurance panels and emphasize the importance of integrity in QA standards.
3. Impose sanctions on politicians, government officials and HEI staff who present phony qualifications.
4. Ensure due process is observed in licensing, granting degree-awarding powers and in the process of accreditation.
5. Legislate protection for whistle-blowers.
6. Expand awareness of the notion of conflict of interest.

### *2. Combatting corruption in the teaching role of higher education institutions*

#### **Some examples of associated corrupt practices:**

- Recruiting/promoting academic and other staff on the basis of bribes, favouritism or influence peddling.
- Absent instructors who do not fulfil their scheduled obligations.
- Sexual or other harassment of staff and students.

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- Altering student marks in return for sexual or other favours.
  - Administrative pressure on academics to alter marks for institutional convenience.

**Preventive actions:**

1. Create an Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) framework through wide consultation.
2. Assign responsibility for oversight of the IQA framework to a senior figure.
3. Publish institutional policies on sexual and other harassment with implementation procedures.
4. Use transparent processes for the appointment of academic and other staff.
5. Put appeals processes in place for academic and administrative decisions.

**3. *Combatting corruption in student admissions and recruitment***

**Some examples of associated corrupt practices:**

- Exceeding enrolment limits set by governments and regulatory bodies.
- Publishing false recruitment advertising.
- Offering bribes to admissions staff or recruitment agents.
- Presenting falsified transcripts and/or fake recommendation letters.
- Participating in cheating rings for admissions tests.

**Preventive actions:**

1. Observe enrolment limits set by governments, professional bodies and HEIs.
2. Publish criteria and procedures for the admission, progression and certification of students.
3. Monitor behaviour of recruitment staff/agents for observance of HEI's requirements and the law.
4. Vet appointments to admissions offices and provide training and support to staff.
5. Have a second person (changed regularly) ratify admissions decisions.
6. Respect timetables for admissions processes.
7. Apply severe penalties to students presenting falsified or fake documents.
8. Include higher education in consumer protection legislation on marketing and advertising.

**4. *Combatting corruption in student assessment***

**Some examples of associated corrupt practices:**

- Sale of exam papers or exam-related material and use of essay mills.
- Bribery of invigilators/proctors and markers.

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- Impersonation of candidates and ghost writing of assignments.
  - Plagiarism and cheating in continuous assessment, assignments and exams.
  - Inconsistencies and favouritism in grading.

**Preventive actions:**

1. Adopt, publicize and implement codes of conduct for the behaviour for staff and students.
2. Inform students of the sanctions for plagiarism/cheating and publish complaints procedures.
3. Ensure security of exam preparation and printing processes.
4. Appoint sufficient numbers of invigilators/proctors, conduct identification checks and install CCTV cameras.
5. Anonymize exam scripts with bar codes & monitor standards of marking.
6. Ensure security of student record systems (restrictions on inputting and effective cybersecurity).
7. Appoint external examiners or use double marking to ensure comparability of standards.

**5. Combatting corruption in credentials and qualifications**

**Some examples of associated corrupt practices:**

- Use of degree mills and accreditation mills (see previous UNESCO/CHEA publication).
- Falsification of transcripts and degree certificates.
- False statements about qualifications on CVs and job applications.
- Political pressures on HEIs to award degrees to public figures.

**Preventive actions:**

1. Ensure HEIs have permission to award the degrees they offer and that programmes are accredited.
2. Develop international security standards for documents relating to HE credentials.
3. Urge countries to support the integrity of their own processes for institutional accreditation.
4. Use document verification technologies to simplify checks by admissions officers, employers, immigration officials, etc.
5. Check the validity of all credentials presented for university admissions and job applications.

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## ***6. Combatting corruption in research theses and publications***

### **Some examples of associated corrupt practices:**

- Presentation of theses translated from other languages as original work.
- Publication by supervisors of research by graduate students without acknowledgement.
- Suppression of rival work by journal reviewers.
- Fabrication of data or results.
- Suppression of inconvenient research results by commercial and other interests.

### **Preventive actions:**

1. Publish and implement ethical codes for research.
2. Implement a code of conduct for research supervision.
3. Check research theses with antiplagiarism software.
4. Encourage publication in peer-reviewed and open access journals.
5. Provide researchers with basic training about copyright and open educational resources.
6. Ensure legal and ethical vetting of all sponsored research contracts with commercial enterprises.

## ***7. Combatting corruption through public awareness***

### **Some examples of associated corrupt practices:**

- Media suppression of stories unfavourable to government and politicians.
- HEIs publishing misleading news releases or suppressing inconvenient news.

### **Preventive actions:**

1. Make codes of conduct for government HE bodies and HEI operations widely accessible and monitor implementation.
2. Include students and faculty in university councils and other parts of HEI governance structures.
3. Encourage faculty to write about corrupt practices in local, regional and international press.
4. Provide information on the accreditation status and employment record of study programmes.
5. Publish exam results and an accessible database of graduates.
6. Conduct and publish anonymous surveys of students/alumni on their perception of corruption in their institution.
7. Publish rankings of HEIs on the criterion of academic integrity.

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## Next steps: A Call to Action

Governments, quality assurance agencies and HEIs worldwide must become more aware of the threat that corruption poses to the credibility, effectiveness and quality of higher education at a time when its importance as a driver of global development has never been higher. External quality assurance agencies should do more to review the risks of corruption in their work and HEIs must ensure that their IQA frameworks are also fit for the purpose of combatting corruption. Training and supporting staff in identifying and exposing corrupt practices should be stepped up.

We encourage the translation of this Advisory Statement into local languages and its wide dissemination within national and regional networks so that fighting corruption can be part of the agenda of meetings and conferences around the world.

Academic corruption is an international problem that afflicts rich and poor countries alike. Creating networks of organizations that are fighting corruption and greater North-South collaboration in capacity building for this purpose are highly desirable. CHEA/CIQG and IIEP will consider how they might best support such initiatives and will also publish further documents on this issue.



APPENDIX I

Matrix of examples of effective preventive actions in higher education arrayed by stakeholders

<b>Combatting corruption in the regulation of higher education systems:</b>	<b>National Governments</b>	<b>Quality Assurance Agencies</b>	<b>HEIs</b>	<b>Faculty &amp; Staff</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Press/ Civil Society</b>	<b>Employers &amp; Professional Bodies</b>
Create transparent processes for appointments to governing councils of all state bodies involved in the regulation and administration of higher education.	X	X		X	X	X	X
Exclude individuals in conflict of interest as members of quality assurance panels and emphasise the importance of integrity in QA standards.	X	X	X			X	X
Impose sanctions on politicians, government officials and HEI staff who present phony qualifications.	X	X	X			X	
Ensure due process is observed in granting degree-awarding powers and in the process of accreditation.	X	X	X			X	X
Legislate protection for whistle-blowers.	X		X	X		X	X
Expand awareness of the notion of conflict of interest.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X



## Matrix of examples of effective preventive actions in higher education arrayed by stakeholders

Combating corruption in the teaching role of higher education institutions:	National Governments	Quality Assurance Agencies	HEIs	Faculty & Staff	Students	Press/ Civil Society	Employers & Professional Bodies
Create an Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) framework through wide consultation.			X	X	X		X
Assign responsibility for oversight of the IQA framework to a senior figure.			X				
Publish institutional policies on sexual and other harassment with implementation procedures.			X	X	X		
Use transparent processes for the appointment of academic and other staff.			X	X		X	
Put appeals processes in place for academic and administrative decisions.			X	X	X		

## Matrix of examples of effective preventive actions in higher education arrayed by stakeholders

<b>Combating corruption in student admissions and recruitment:</b>	<b>National Governments</b>	<b>Quality Assurance Agencies</b>	<b>HEIs</b>	<b>Faculty &amp; Staff</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Press/ Civil Society</b>	<b>Employers &amp; Professional Bodies</b>
Observe enrollment limits set by governments, professional bodies and HEIs.	X	X	X			X	X
Publish criteria and procedures for the admission, progression and certification of students.		X	X	X		X	X
Monitor behaviour of recruitment staff/agents for observance of HEI's requirements and the law.	X	X	X	X		X	X
Vet appointments to admissions offices and provide training and support to staff.			X				
Have a second person (changed regularly) ratify admissions decisions.		X	X				
Respect timetables for admissions processes.		X	X	X			
Apply severe penalties to students presenting falsified or fake documents.		X	X			X	
Include higher education in consumer protection legislation on marketing and advertising.	X	X				X	

## Matrix of examples of effective preventive actions in higher education arrayed by stakeholders

<b>Combatting corruption in student assessment:</b>	<b>National Governments</b>	<b>Quality Assurance Agencies</b>	<b>HEIs</b>	<b>Faculty &amp; Staff</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Press/ Civil Society</b>	<b>Employers &amp; Professional Bodies</b>
Adopt, publicize and implement codes of conduct for the behaviour for staff and students.	X	X	X	X	X		X
Inform students of the sanctions for plagiarism/ cheating and publish complaints procedures.			X	X	X	X	
Ensure security of exam preparation and printing processes.		X	X				X
Appoint sufficient numbers of invigilators/ proctors, conduct identification checks and install CCTV cameras.		X	X	X			
Anonymize exam scripts with bar codes & monitor standards of marking.		X	X	X			X
Ensure security of student record systems (restrictions on inputting and effective cyber-security).		X	X				
Appoint external examiners or use double marking to ensure comparable standards.		X	X	X			X

**Matrix of examples of effective preventive actions in higher education arrayed by stakeholders**

<b>Combating corruption in credentials and qualifications:</b>	<b>National Governments</b>	<b>Quality Assurance Agencies</b>	<b>HEIs</b>	<b>Faculty &amp; Staff</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Press/ Civil Society</b>	<b>Employers &amp; Professional Bodies</b>
Ensure HEIs have permission to award the degrees they offer and that programs are accredited.	X	X	X			X	X
Develop international security standards for documents relating to HE credentials.	X	X	X				X
Urge countries to support the integrity of their own processes for institutional accreditation.	X	X					X
Use document verification technologies to simplify checks by admissions officers, employers, immigration officials, etc.	X	X	X			X	X
Check the validity of all credentials presented for university admissions and job applications.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

**Matrix of examples of effective preventive actions in higher education arrayed by stakeholders**

<b>Combatting corruption in research theses and publications:</b>	<b>National Governments</b>	<b>Quality Assurance Agencies</b>	<b>HEIs</b>	<b>Faculty &amp; Staff</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Press/ Civil Society</b>	<b>Employers &amp; Professional Bodies</b>
Publish and implement ethical codes for research.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Implement a code of conduct for research supervision.		X	X	X	X		
Check research theses with antiplagiarism software.		X	X	X	X		
Encourage publication in peer-reviewed and open access journals.	X		X	X	X	X	X
Provide researchers with basic training about copyright and open educational resources.			X	X	X		
Ensure legal and ethical vetting of all sponsored research contracts with commercial enterprises.			X			X	

## Matrix of examples of effective preventive actions in higher education arrayed by stakeholders

<b>Combatting corruption through public awareness:</b>	<b>National Governments</b>	<b>Quality Assurance Agencies</b>	<b>HEIs</b>	<b>Faculty &amp; Staff</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Press/ Civil Society</b>	<b>Employers &amp; Professional Bodies</b>
Make codes of conduct for government HE bodies and HEI operations widely accessible.	X	X	X			X	X
Include students and faculty in university councils and other parts of HEI governance structures.	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Encourage faculty to write about corrupt practices in local, regional and international press.			X	X		X	
Provide information on the accreditation status and employment record of study programmes.		X	X			X	X
Publish exam results and an accessible database of graduates.			X				
Conduct and publish anonymous surveys of students/alumni on their perception of corruption in their institution.			X		X	X	
Publish rankings of HEIs on the criterion of academic integrity.		X	X			X	

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## APPENDIX II

### SELECTED REFERENCES TO CORRUPTION CASES<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> CHEA and IIEP cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information in these articles.

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## APPENDIX II

### SELECTED REFERENCES TO CORRUPTION CASES<sup>1</sup> (continued)

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