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Quality Assurance and Combatting Academic Corruption

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The Digital Revolution in Cheating Has Already Begun

Brendan O'Malley

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Being told we live in the age of the Internet of Things where our gadgets are all interconnected at first seemed like something to celebrate, a digital revolution in convenience allowing us to turn on the heating at home before leaving the office, or ask Alexa to play us our favourite song and on will come *Nessun Dorma*.

More recently reports have revealed a sinister side to these 'Things', where people can snoop on us all day through our baby monitor or computer camera, or terrorise us by mysteriously opening and shutting our curtains from afar.

Similarly, contradictory outcomes could be predicted for higher education in a world of digitalisation.

On the positive side, developments such as blockchain technology, which is claimed to be incorruptible, may enable digital student data portability and 'open badges' that can be shared across the web – a Godsend in particular for refugee students who want to be able to prove their credentials when applying for university courses in host countries but often lack paperwork from destroyed institutions back home.

But digitally disruptive behaviour could also play havoc, for instance if someone works out how to hack into the blockchain, destroy electronic exam submissions with a 'superworm', or store exam notes on intelligent glasses, or use little two-way cameras for feeding back answers to questions.

Some of these examples are cited by Irene Glendinning, a member of a group of global experts carrying out research into what quality assurance and accreditation bodies are doing to tackle academic corruption around the world. The group was formed by the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, and the International Quality Group of the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation, or CHEA/CIQG.

She says the danger with digitalisation is that an equivalent of an arms race will emerge, for instance with students being offered ever more sophisticated tools to find ways to cheat on essays or in exams, and plagiarism checkers becoming ever more sophisticated in the way they

cross-examine work.

Problems caused by sophisticated technology do not always need sophisticated responses, however. A faculty member in the Office of Teaching and Learning at Coventry University in the United Kingdom, Glendinning says her own university a few years ago began providing students taking exams with airline security-style plastic bags to put any electronic gadgets in and place beneath their seat where it was visible.

Then if anything was found on their person that could communicate with the outside world, whether it was a smart watch or a mobile phone, or earpieces and two-way cameras, the student would be penalised whether or not they had used it.

She says two of the biggest problems today are the existence of diploma mills providing false certificates from authentic institutions and essay mills or contract cheating as it is called now, which could not have taken off without the internet enabling both the essay writers and the students seeking their help to connect.

She says the latter problem can be addressed by persuading hard-pressed academic staff on the front line that it is not in their interests to ignore it – “and one way you can do that is to make it easy for them to gather the evidence”.

She points to the fact that people can now look at the metadata in a file and see whether students wrote the information themselves.

One problem in deterring essay mills, however, is that it is difficult to prosecute for two reasons. One is that due to online accessibility they can be based anywhere in the world and not within the university’s state boundaries, so how do you enforce legislation across international boundaries?

“Another is that if you manage to close them down, they will just pop up somewhere else,” Glendinning says.

“But if more countries have legislation it will be more difficult to do that.”

She points to a useful approach suggested by two academics from Swansea University, Wales. Michael Draper and Phil Newton have proposed framing legislation around the area of strict liability of companies and their duty of care to their customers. So if they don’t tell customers what is likely to happen to them if caught, they are breaching that duty.

This may be easier to establish than fraud, particularly in the case of essay mills that say on their website that their essays are not meant to be copied but give a different impression in conversations with their clients or assure them that they have used tools to ensure they are ‘plagiarism free’.

Blackmailing students

However, the best defence for the essay mills is that the students who use them do not want to implicate themselves for cheating. In some cases unscrupulous companies play on this by blackmailing the students, demanding that they pay more or they will be exposed to their university. Glendinning says she has some evidence of this occurring in both Australia and the UK.

She believes one of the most effective responses may have nothing to do with technology and more to do with changing student behaviour, by educating them.

Her own institution was given funding this year to appoint student champions for academic integrity, who are student representatives from different parts of the university who are trained in the principles of academic integrity and given the job of highlighting to other students why it is wrong to cheat and the importance of doing the work you have been asked to do.

“It is run through the student union and a lot of their communication is through social media, but also course representatives have face to face contact with their course groups. They can run sessions for other students but generally will be signposting and connecting them to services to understand what will happen to them [if they cheat].”

The university has also made it easier for people to report cases they come across by providing anonymity, a form of witness protection.

Gareth Crossman, head of policy and public affairs at the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), says academic corruption is “increasingly an international issue which demands an international response”.

The QAA has set up an academic integrity working group which takes a sector-wide approach to academic corruption problems.

“If you are realistic about it and say is it possible to create an environment where it is impossible for students to find a way to cheat, the answer is probably not,” Crossman said.

“There are commercial entities which exist to make a profit and if you can make the market difficult enough for them, primarily through making students more aware of the consequences of the use of their services but also by picking up on it if people are cheating – and it’s not rocket science if students’ work suddenly goes to a significantly higher level – you can change things.”

He says QAA produces guidance for universities about how they can identify essay mills and make it harder for them to operate, in particular how to detect when students start using them.

“But while we have been able to take action against advertising from UK-based mills, most of these companies are operating overseas, many of them operating from Eastern Europe and the Indian subcontinent, which makes it very difficult to adopt a legislative approach.”

Tackling credentials fraud

While blockchain technology may one day provide a more secure way of verifying credentials as well as storing them, data sharing is already providing a way to tackle credentials fraud.

HEDD Prospects – HEDD stands for Higher Education Degree Datacheck – in the UK provides one answer to that problem. Essentially what it does is offer a much more effective way of managing the enquiry process than individuals contacting a university directly via their registration office or student record office to check if a degree really has been awarded.

Chris Rea, head of verification services at the company, explains that HEDD provides a central system, where an employer can enter the details of the candidate into the system and the university sees it and can check the details and respond and the employer gets a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. With some institutions there is data integration with the HEDD system, enabling auto-verification. But no enquiry can be induced without the consent of the candidate.

Rea says degree fraud is now a “terrible global industry” and the UK is a target because its degrees are highly prized – so they are “highly faked and highly forged as well”.

A second form of it is the selling of credentials from bogus institutions, which often have a similar name to respected real ones. HEDD runs a degree fraud reporting service on behalf of the UK Department for Education and has helped shut down more than 50 fake institutions in four years.

“Digitisation offers new channels and opportunities. But much degree fraud in the area of bogus universities is online anyway,” he says.

The key principle in tackling it is the importance of checking. “It is the single most important preventive measure,” he says.

The problem in the UK is that the checking culture does not run deep, he says. “The education process for employers is where the battle will be won for degree fraud. If every employer checked degree accreditation of every candidate, degree fraud would vanish or at least be much harder to commit.”

Internationally there is one dramatic example of strong government action to tackle this problem. His company spends a lot of time networking internationally and has one profound relationship with China, where the government has made it mandatory that any returning graduate who studied in the UK or elsewhere before entering the Chinese labour market has to have their

degree credentials verified.

So HEDD has a partnership with the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange, which is responsible for validation and authentication.

“They process the vast majority of their graduates through HEDD. The same process happens for those returning from the US.”

Retraction difficulties

Retractions in research publications is another area with a particular problem in the digital age, because once a publication has been republished or reported on all over the internet, it is very difficult to fully retract false statements whether intentional or a mistake.

As Glendinning points out, sometimes retraction is needed to address research that has been put together corruptly, either via plagiarism or as a hoax. “How do you stop people citing the incorrect work and how do you signal to them that it is not reliable. This is particularly important in medical research where people are building work on false results,” she says.

“There have been suggestions calling for a central global body to oversee it. Again, the problem is so international; with no national boundaries it makes sense to have an overarching body looking into this.”

Another area requiring an international response is the rise of predatory conferences facilitated by email marketing and website promotions. The organisers make money from charging people for publishing their work in journals or allowing them to speak.

It is a problem fuelled by the requirement in some countries for people seeking a research job or professorship to have a set number of publications to their name irrespective of the ranking of the journals they appear in.

International co-operation

A potentially key platform for international cooperation on academic corruption is the [Groningen Declaration Network](#) (GDN), set up six years ago to bring organisations around the globe together to work on full Digital Student Data Portability. Its members – which include the governments of Italy, France, Malta and the Netherlands – meet every year to share best practice.

In relation to degree verification, HEDD Prospects is talking to potential partners in the US, South Africa, Australia, the Netherlands and elsewhere to build on a vision where there is a GDN of interconnected systems across the world that share access to degree depositories and other data depositories.

“We currently have a system that enables verification of UK degree holders, but we envisage a time when we can connect to other systems that enable verification of US, Indian and other degree holders and all systems will talk to each other. This is the intention of global agencies,” says Rea.

But Sir John Daniel, former assistant director-general for education at UNESCO, and former chair of the CHEA/CIQG Advisory Council, has urged caution on the sharing of data and says even the GDN’s vision of making qualifications portable so students can have their qualification details on a secure data stick or website in a way that can’t be tampered with is already facing doubts because some people are casting doubt on the trustworthiness and protection of privacy.

“There are people who have already claimed to have cracked blockchain systems,” he says, and, referring to the Facebook data scandal among other things, he notes that “in the past year there has been a massive loss of public trust due to people getting hold of massive amounts of [personal] data. So I think the public will be wary and will not face a huge temptation to trust that.”



Developing Countries Showing Way to Fight Fraud

Brendan O'Malley

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Nigeria is among a number of developing countries going further than many developed countries in specifically addressing academic corruption in law and many African universities are seeking to copy its commitment to not only punish but name and shame offenders.

When Peter Okebukola was appointed executive secretary of the National Universities Commission, or NUC, in Nigeria in 2001, one of the first things he decided to do was move against satellite campuses that were selling certificates, a major source of academic fraud.

He persuaded the then president of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, to provide him with police back-up and on 3 August he issued an executive order to close the campuses. The police department sent officers to every satellite campus – there were 60 or so at the time – to enforce the order and in one day they were all shut down.

“In Africa you have to be firm and fair or it doesn’t work,” he says. “The achievement spurred me to walk further along this path.”

More than a decade later, in 2012, a national survey of academic corruption in Nigeria showed the breadth of the ongoing challenge.

In a higher education system serving 160 universities and 1.8 million students, forms of corruption reported included cheating during exams; marks given for favours, especially financial and sexual; hacking of institutional IT systems to alter students’ academic records; plagiarism of assignments, term papers and theses; absenteeism of students and lecturers from classes; failure to cover the syllabus before the end of the semester and the conduct of the examination; outsourcing of theses, assignments and projects; publishing in fake journals; and sabotage involving preventing others from completing their work, for example by cutting pages out of library books or wilfully disrupting the experiments of others.

Okebukola, who is now president of the Global University Network for Innovation, or GUNi-Africa, with 44 member countries, and a distinguished professor of science and computer education at Lagos State University, Nigeria, told *University World News*: “These forms [of corruption] are common in many African countries – they were all reported in country experiences documented in the communique of GUNi-Africa’s 2017 regional conference last September.”

The GUNi-Africa president has been fighting academic corruption for many years, first in Nigeria, and now both across Africa and globally in collaboration with [CIQG](#) – the International Quality Group of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in the United States – and UNESCO.

He doesn't think there is any difference between developing and developed countries in terms of the form of academic corruption.

“Every category can be found in both. Whether in India, the US or the UK you will find all these forms of corruption. But the scale is on a different level in developing countries.”

There are a few reasons for the latter, he says: the greater emphasis placed on paper qualifications, rather than the ability to perform; the very large classes, where it is harder to prevent copying of assignments; and the pressure on admissions from a lack of spaces, and the huge competition for graduate jobs.

Over the past five years, since the shocking findings of the 2012 survey, which Okebukola himself led, there has been a clear drive by government and many universities, encouraged by the NUC, to establish clear policies on academic corruption to address the problems and make students and staff aware of what the penalties for transgressions will be.

A key step was that, following the 2012 national survey, the Nigerian government set up the Anti-Corruption Academy of Nigeria, the first of its kind in Africa, that conducts capacity-building workshops for staff and students on avoiding academic corruption.

In addition, clear policies on academic corruption have been established in all universities stating what is considered to be corruption and what the penalties will be.

These are widely disseminated and, in many universities, students and staff are made to sign an agreement on them.

In all Nigerian universities, giant notice boards conspicuously display key aspects of the policies. All examination scripts have the policy on the front page.

Importantly, sanctions are applied when the policies are transgressed regardless of the status of the offender. Wide publicity including in national dailies is given to guilty parties.

Making staff and students aware of the sanctions is very important. “If you walked into any Nigerian university today you would see a big signboard warning that cheating in the exam will lead to dismissal from the university and you will find the same message on any exam paper,” says Okebukola. Staff who are found guilty of corrupt practices are also sacked.

Among the practical steps to crack down on corruption, many universities now use plagiarism checker software. Also in many universities, all assignments, term papers and theses are

accompanied by a signed statement by the student confirming that the materials therein are not plagiarised.

University policy on fake journals and the names of such journals are widely disseminated and universities are encouraged to share them. The Association of Vice-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities collaborates with the NUC to update the blacklist. In addition, postgraduate students and staff are encouraged to patronise high-impact, good quality journals.

So what has been the impact? In December 2017, a national survey showed a 20% reduction in cases of examination malpractice.

Name and shame and punish

Okebukola says if there is a lesson from Nigeria's experience for other countries, it is a very straightforward one: "Name and shame, let the world know that this person has been found guilty of this – and punish, punish, punish," he says.

Nothing works better than publishing the details of transgressions, he argues.

"In Nigeria when you are caught it is not just that you get a letter saying you are being extricated from the university, it is published on the university website, in national dailies, the press carry it. So if don't want to bring name of your family into disrepute or ruin your reputation ...[Everyone] knows the repercussions and this makes others scared of walking along the same path."

Okebukola accepts that in any country it is harder to take effective action measures in higher education if the context is a society where corruption is widespread.

He stresses that while the West likes to highlight examples of corruption or malpractice in Africa, in fact they can be found in every country, including the US and the UK.

Even the current president of the United States, Donald Trump, has faced allegations of fraud, over the now defunct for-profit Trump University. He [settled three class action fraud suits for US\\$25 million](#) in November 2016, days after his election victory, with no admission of fault or liability. The suits had listed more than 6,000 people who claimed they were lured into paying up to US\$35,000 to learn the secrets of Trump's business success.

But Okebukola accepts that Nigeria has a poor image internationally on corruption, which makes the task harder – Nigeria was ranked 136th out of 175 countries assessed in [Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index](#) in 2014, and 31st out of 47 countries assessed in Sub-Saharan Africa.

"We must factor in reducing corruption in society at large. Universities have a role in producing graduates that have a low tendency towards corruption. But when the graduate comes out and works in an environment riddled with corruption, it is difficult."

His view is that to be effective you must tackle corruption not just in universities but at all levels in the education system. Even at basic level there are corrupt teachers, and parents who bribe them for exam questions because they want their children to get into elite schools, and when the students go on to university the same practices carry on.

Judith Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation or CHEA, says countries such as Nigeria, Pakistan and the Philippines, that have most recently been developing quality assurance capacity, have all had issues around corruption but have been focusing in their quality assurance development on how to deal with the issues, including tackling fake degrees and shutting down degree mills.

Commitment and purposefulness

“If you look at the US we don’t explicitly focus on academic corruption in our legislation and we don’t close down many schools,” Eaton says. “But I think these developing countries are displaying a certain kind of strength, commitment and purposefulness that is not there in developed countries.”

In Nigeria the NUC is assisting with workshops to share knowledge and promote awareness. Workshops were also used in Accra, Ghana, for the meeting of GUNi members from 24 countries.

CHEA now cites Nigeria as one of a number of countries developing quality assurance capacity that is instituting explicit laws against certain types of corruption, monitoring institutions and shutting them down if there is evidence of corruption.

Across Africa, GUNi-Africa is building capacity, talking to officials, pressing for public awareness and ensuring that people who are caught are sanctioned and that the sanctions are publicised.

The organisation is using the guidelines on academic corruption developed by CIQG – whose advisory council Okebukola chairs – and UNESCO. “We are starting a major movement in Africa,” Okebukola says, “with the aim of reducing incidents of corruption by 5% a year in the higher education systems of the Africa region.

“We are taking this very seriously because of the deleterious effect it has on national development.”



What Are QA Bodies Doing to Tackle Academic Corruption?

Brendan O'Malley

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A group of global experts is carrying out research into what quality assurance and accreditation bodies are doing to tackle academic corruption around the world.

The survey is the initiative of the expert group formed by the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, or IIEP, and the International Quality Group of the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation, or CHEA/CIQG.

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, CHEA senior advisor on international affairs and a member of the CHEA International Quality Group (CIQG) Advisory Council, and also former head of higher education at UNESCO, told *University World News* it is the first time there has been a global survey into what quality assurance and accreditation bodies are doing on this issue.

The baseline research is being carried out by Irene Glendinning, another member of the expert group, who is based at Coventry University in the United Kingdom. She has previously carried out research on the impact of policies for plagiarism across Europe, which involved a survey of 33 countries.

Judith Eaton, president of CHEA, said: “One of the things we need to be exploring is whether in quality assurance we are accustomed to seeking integrity and what we need to do to combat corruption.”

It follows on from the publication of a [joint advisory statement for effective international practice on combating corruption](#) in higher education, published by UNESCO IIEP and CHEA/CIQG in July last year, drafted by Sir John Daniel. It was aimed at quality assurance bodies, but also governments.

According to Uvalić-Trumbić, a key aim of the research is to approach quality assurance bodies and find out to what extent they address the issue in their external reviews.

“Some do. Some don’t. There are only a few that really have guidelines for standards on corruption and academic integrity.”

Glendinning said it is a response to a worldwide problem.

“If you open a newspaper in any country you will know – that there is corruption. No country is completely free from corruption. It varies in the extent to which it occurs, depending on where you are.

“One of things that came out of the research in Europe was how little connection anyone sees between quality assurance and corruption, plagiarism, cheating. I thought there was a very strong connection there. But not many quality assurance agencies in Europe we surveyed were doing anything about corruption.

“So the latest research we have just started is to survey different quality assurance agencies around the world and accreditation bodies to ask them if they are aware of corruption under their remit in their jurisdiction, what they are doing about it and what particular concerns they have.”

Six areas of focus

The research will be focusing on the six areas of corruption covered in the [Advisory Statement for Effective International Practice](#) on combating corruption in higher education, although corruption is much broader than that.

These six areas are, corruption in:

- the regulation of higher education systems;
- the teaching role of higher education institutions;
- student admissions and recruitment;
- student assessment;
- credentials and qualifications; and
- research theses and publications.

The survey will be carried out over a year, and will be started in the summer. It will be pitched at 200 or so quality assurance and accreditation bodies around the world, or bodies that provide a licence to practise, such as professional associations. These will include bodies that accredit subjects, others that award degrees and others that are just concerned with quality, such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK.

“The idea is to find out what their awareness is of corruption and what they are doing,” Glendinning says.

In the regulation of higher education systems, the questions will focus on bodies which are regulating and accrediting courses and subjects, where, for instance, problems arise if someone overlooks conflict of interest or succumbs to bribery.

In teaching and learning the problems typically involve cheating or plagiarism, but also bribery of lecturers, which has come up a lot in Europe, and sexual favours. “There are lots of cases

where students will pay a lecturer to give them a higher mark,” Glendinning says.

In admissions and recruitment, the problems might involve favouritism and bribery. In student assessment, there are different forms of malpractice and corruption and cheating in exams, often using technology.

“But also we are working extensively on contract cheating, the use of companies who offer to do students’ work for them. This is more than essay mills and includes impersonation for payment, producing false ID cards and so on,” Glendinning says.

“That is a big problem because it is very difficult to detect and to prove, and really undermines the whole of standards of assessment you set, if students can get away with it.”

Corruption in credentials and qualifications mainly involves degree mills, where people pay for a company to provide them with a fake degree certificate, or enrol them on a bogus course and provide them with a fake certificate that looks genuine.

“Some of those have been successfully closed down. But the problem is that they can set up anywhere in world, even if you make it illegal, because they are not in anyone’s jurisdiction. You can register anywhere in the world and the people who work for them can be anywhere in world. It is very difficult to close them down.”

Fraudulent research

Problems in research and publications include fraudulent research, bogus publications, predatory journals. “It is quite a big area and, if it is allowed to persist and people lose their faith in research, this undermines higher education in general.”

Some of these activities might not be classed as corruption, particularly plagiarism, which might be categorised as misconduct. “But where you are setting out to cheat deliberately, particularly with the buying of essays, that is undermining the system. Similarly with bribery, asking favours, making up research results, or distorting the results, or altering results to be in line with a funder. They are forms of corruption,” Glendinning said.

Glendinning says when the group set up the scope of the research, they thought maybe they ought to also be asking questions of governments, since quite often the quality assurance and accreditation bodies get their authority from governments.

“So the other question is what is the authority above you doing about it? Is anyone else working on it, if not you? We expect some bodies to say ‘we don’t have any of these corruptions in our area’. It doesn’t necessarily mean there isn’t any, just that they are not aware of it.”

The overall aim is to find out whether quality assurance and accreditation bodies have the authority to take measures in these six areas of corruption, and what kind of measures are they taking or can they take to “force positive change”.

“And if they are not doing anything, do they see that as part of their role? Who do they think is responsible?”

The key finding, Uvalić-Trumbić says, will be the answer to the question about whether the quality assurance and accreditation bodies have taken any punitive measures if academic integrity is not being respected.

“But also [of interest will be] the case studies coming out of good practice and bad practice, because they will show to what extent quality assurance will be helpful in this respect.”

Advocacy role

The second point of the research is to plant a seed in the minds of those running the relevant bodies, suggesting that maybe they should do something about corruption, question whether they have the authority, and if not, consider how they can extend it if they think this is important.

“Surveys can act as a form of advocacy. Once we have got the survey result in, we will follow up on any interesting information that arises and do interviews in more depth. We are looking for good practice, ideas that other organisations can learn from,” Glendinning said.

At the end of the exercise she expects to have a much clearer picture about where there is activity that is helping to secure standards and quality within higher education at all different levels, functions of university and different roles.

“So we will have a clearer idea of the gaps. That will lead to various recommendations on what people ought to do, based hopefully on the good practice we will find. And some of that will be targeting governments, as they have the power to extend the remit and oversight of these different bodies.”

Work has begun on developing guidance, in collaboration with the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency or QAA, for universities on contract cheating.

Guidance for students is being put together by the UK’s National Union of Students and QAA, and there will be other guidance for higher education institutions, especially policy-makers, but also for academic staff and managers on how to set policies to discourage contract cheating and how you can try to detect and prove it when it happens.

“It’s not like plagiarism, where you can put [the work] through software. The pieces of work are bespoke for the student, whether it is writing essays or sitting exams. You can even have a service where you get it produced in instalments, so you can discuss it with the tutor and come back with the next instalment. It is very hard to detect.”

Any quality assurance and accreditation bodies that have not been contacted and want to be involved in the survey can get in touch with Irene Glendinning via email:

[csx128@coventry.ac.uk/](mailto:csx128@coventry.ac.uk)

Seeking Global Cooperation to Fight Corruption in HE

Brendan O'Malley

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It is one year since global experts issued a wake-up call to higher education to fight academic corruption more aggressively and urged the sector's quality assurance systems to take a leading role in the battle. So what progress has been made?

The call came from an Expert Group formed by the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning and the International Quality Group of the US Council for Higher Education Accreditation or CHEA/CIQG.

In a joint advisory statement “for effective international practice”, they voiced alarm at the increasing frequency of press reports of corrupt practices in the higher education sector and described combatting corruption and enhancing integrity as a “contemporary challenge for the quality and credibility of higher education”.

The statement referred to an ABC of dishonest practices – absenteeism, appropriation, bribery, cheating, corruption, deceit, embezzlement, extortion, favouritism, fraud, graft, harassment and impersonation – undermining the academic operation of higher education institutions around the world.

It warned: “Higher education institutions, 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 organisations.”

And it issued a wake-up call to higher education worldwide, particularly to quality assurance organisations, to take steps to address the problem.

Here *University World News* talks to Judith Eaton, president of CHEA, about the challenges of academic corruption, the role quality assurance and particularly international cooperation in quality assurance can play in tackling it and what action has been taken since the advisory statement was issued.

UWN: *How widespread is academic corruption? How important is it to address it?*

Judith Eaton: I don't know that we have a definitive answer. There is no single source

examining corruption worldwide, its frequency and what to do. There have been studies in different countries, ministries have looked into it and there is a lot of information about various forms of corruption around the world – whether we are talking about buying degrees, fake degrees, plagiarism or questionable hires for colleges or universities.

We have to address it because it undermines the value and effectiveness of higher education. The biggest issue here is protecting students and making sure that if they invest in higher education, they are getting value for that investment in the form of intellectual development, in the form of preparation for their career, for work and for life.

Corruption can cost students money – they have made an investment but where there is corruption it can come to nought.

It also diminishes the value of the profession as a whole. We want higher education that is sound, reliable, that makes significant progress intellectually and provides a service to society. Corruption weakens our capacity to do that and weakens public confidence in higher education.

UWN: *Are there new trends or new forms of academic corruption emerging as the higher landscape changes and diversifies, particularly with technological developments and the increasing possibility of earning credits towards a degree from different institutions, or online? What action can be taken?*

Judith Eaton: I think the internet and online education have been an invitation to engage in all kinds of undesirable activities more frequently and among more people.

Also the internet is international and in a sense doesn't have any international oversight. Countries have laws in regard to corruption, in regard to what their institutions offer online or on the ground, but when institutions go totally online they don't have to be licensed or country-based. There is no mechanism to scrutinise international online providers. That has been conducive to more and more rogue institutions selling degrees and phony credentials.

We have already taken steps to address this, whether it is through quality assurance, ministries publishing white lists, or through greater transparency, making more information readily available in various countries.

One of the points of focusing on the role of quality assurance or QA is that we want to be able to take this thinking to the next step, with regulation in the higher education space.

Right now we have just agreed to undertake a baseline study of what QA bodies around the world are doing about corruption. This will be completed either by the end of this year or in 2018. It will give us a good sense of capacity of QA organisations in this area and what else to do.

By 'we' I mean the QA community, through CIQG, UNESCO, OECD to the international network of QA agencies. The international QA community is modest in size, but many of us know each other and work together.

UWN: *What does academic corruption mean, had it been researched, and can it be confused with poor performance? What in particular is the role of QA organisations in addressing it?*

Judith Eaton: The advisory statement says there are a variety of forms considered corruption in some countries – plagiarism, hiring without consistent application processes, paying for degrees. We can operationally define it and know in some countries some of the things happening. And we are starting with a cluster of undesirable activities and seeing how we can address that.

We also need to explore what approach makes most sense. Do we address it from a country basis working together, regionally or internationally.? We don't know the answer to that.

Institutionally I think it fair to say the QA community has focused particularly on integrity in higher education and how to further it in higher education and our own QA practices. The other side is identifying corruption very directly and saying we need to do some things here.

Integrity problems may be caused by weak procedures but are not intentional. Corruption is an intentional act. Degree mills are out to get you. It's an intentional rip-off. So while in QA we are accustomed to seeking integrity, what we need to do is combat corruption especially. The statement was the beginning of an undertaking; we are framing the issue in this way.

UWN: *A year after the wake-up call, what response have you had? How do you rate the attempts to address this problem, which ones are working, which ones need more work? Corruption by its nature is secretive – how do you look for it and find it?*

Judith Eaton: There has been some evidence of a wake up. We have had our colleagues and members of the advisory committee make presentations at various conferences and meetings about the advisory statement and had suggestions there.

We have had discussions with other organisations about what we can do together. We have also launched our own webinar series – we had one last Monday on plagiarism.

We are developing a way to frame the challenge to QA. It's taking time. But there has been no overt opposition.

Part of the challenge is that what might be considered corruption in one country might not in another, for example hiring family members at an institution, and plagiarism – in some countries it is seen as a form of complimenting – so there is the question of how we deal with cultural variation if we are talking about an international problem.

The internationalisation of higher education does produce additional challenges. We don't know whether it spreads corruption, but it does make addressing it more complex. Do we tell visiting students certain things are okay in your country but not in ours? And what do we say to students going to other countries where corruption may take place?

UWN: *How can the capacity of QA organisations to address corruption be built up around the*

world? Is there any international collaboration and momentum on this?

Judith Eaton: We are trying to focus on that space where QA is involved and acting on corruption directly. We are not at a stage where direct action is being taken; what we are trying to do is build awareness, make the wake-up call louder, do research, bring people together and develop approaches to combatting corruption.

Corruption is sometimes right in front of us, going online trying to buy a degree, at other times things like discovering plagiarism comes from academics reviewing academics. But when it comes to students and plagiarism, there are programmes enabling faculty to examine work students submit for evidence of plagiarism.

The first thing we are doing is the baseline research on current capacity and at the same time we want to explore commissioning a paper or two on the distinction between encouraging integrity and combatting corruption, and what are the similarities or differences for QA agencies. This is an enormous challenge, and goes into other topics, like accountability.

So far there is a lack of history of QA addressing corruption, so we have got to do a lot of framing along the way. We want to engage a broader community in future discussions.

It's about getting to the point where QA bodies do take steps to build in more expectations and standards. Quality assurance is a more and more important issue for governments around the world. Addressing corruption is an element of that which we want to emphasise.