



Seeking Global Cooperation to Fight Corruption in HE

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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.