



## 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/)