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Academic fraud and quality assurance: Facing the challenge of internationalisation of higher education

by

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ACADEMIC FRAUD AND QUALITY ASSURANCE:

FACING THE CHALLENGE OF INTERNATIONALISATION OF

HIGHER EDUCATION

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CHAPTER 1 : Introduction

Globalisation has had a major impact on higher education. According to some estimates, this sector represents the third largest service export in Australia, earning more than 7 billion US dollars for the economy. In the UK, from 1992 to 1993, £310 million in fees was paid by non-EU students alone. These students spent a further £415 million on British goods and services during the same year, which is more than twice the export value of coal, gas and electricity. Among the top 34 UK export markets for merchandise suppliers feature 25 of the same countries found among the top 34 home countries for overseas students in the UK, suggesting that time spent in the UK helps "generate a stock of goodwill towards UK products" (AUT & DEA, 1999).

The expansion of higher education has gone hand in hand with the diversification of its market and products. This can be seen in the increased competition among students and institutions, the growing need for recognition and certification of courses, and the trans-border phenomenon of overseas students and courses becoming increasingly difficult to regulate. As the sector becomes ever more complex, with the impact of new information and

communication technologies (ICTs) on distance learning, for example, new opportunities for unethical and corrupt practices are emerging. Although this is a relatively recent development, it has become a major cause for concern.

This paper therefore looks at academic fraud in higher education and the means by which it can be addressed for quality assurance. It starts by examining academic fraud today, focusing on the new forms of credential fraud and the impact of ICTs. It then moves on to explore the development of fraud in the accreditation and certification processes, including the issue of distance courses. This is followed by an analysis of the new opportunities for fraud offered by the trans-border phenomena of overseas students and courses. In conclusion, it highlights the recent trend towards more transparency, accountability and ethics which has developed to counter this fraud.

CHAPTER 2 : Academic fraud : new forms of credentials fraud and the impact of ICTs

Responsibility for the rise in academic fraud lies with four major factors: first, the enlarged competition in the labour market – the higher the stakes, whether it be increase in pay, job promotion or fame – the greater the likelihood of cheating and unethical practices; second, weak management of examination and other control systems, including standardized tests; third, corrupt faculty members and managers of exams and tests; and lastly, the rapid development of electronic technology (web, Internet, etc.).

This corruption takes various forms. *Table 2.1* details the 'classic forms'; namely, agreements between students and faculty members or administrators, such as students paying

professors for good grades or administrators charging the families of students for admittance to their university.

Table 2.1 : Forms of Academic fraud

Examples of Categories of Educational Specific Corruption

Participants	Examples	Area of Occurrence
Student–faculty exchange	Student offers money for examination grade that professor accepts and gives a good grade to the student although he or she does not know the subject.	Academic corruption
	Faculty member sells a student a term paper.	Academic corruption
	Professor gives a low grade to a student who knows the subject and recommends private tutoring. Later he/she passes the student regardless of how much the student learned.	Academic corruption
Student–administrator exchange	An administrator "helps" a slow learner to obtain good grades in all subjects by ordering relevant faculty members to grade him or her favorably. Student pays an administrator a "service fee."	Academic corruption
	Administrator charges student's family a fee for guaranteed admission to his or her university.	Academic corruption

Source: Rumyantseva (2005)

Instances of such corruption worldwide can be seen in headlines in the media. For instance in China 'hired men' take exams for anywhere between US$200 and US$1 200. In India, fees for manipulating entrance test scores are between US$80 to US$20 000 for the most popular programs such as computer science, medicine or engineering. Paper setters in Pakistan run their own tuition centres where candidates, on payment of substantial fees, are granted access to at least part of the examination papers. Finally, in South Africa an exam scandal forced the provincial agriculture department to withhold bursaries.

In recent years, extensive developments in ICTs have immensely widened the scope for fraud in academia, at the same time introducing new innovative methods of malpractice. The Internet is now arguably the leading vehicle for fraudulent practices. Amongst other things, it has facilitated the practices of selling essays and term papers (rendering plagiarism a major problem), as well as fake degrees sometimes even from reputable colleges and institutions such Harvard and Yale or others in London and Paris. The numerous websites include www.fakedegrees.com and www.cheathouse.com. *Box 1* below contains an example of some of the many advertisements being circulated by institutions that trade in counterfeit qualifications.

Box 1 An advertisement for counterfeit diplomas

A Genuine College Degree in 2 weeks !
Have you ever thought that the only thing stopping you from a great job and better pay was a few letters behind your name? Well now you can get them!

BA   BSc   MA   MSc   MBA   PhD

Within 2 weeks!
No Study Required!
100% Verifiable!

These are real, genuine degrees that include Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate degrees. They are verifiable and student records and transcripts are also available. This little known secret has been kept quiet for years. The opportunity exists due to a legal loophole allowing some established colleges to award degrees at their discretion. With all of the attention that this news has been generating, I wouldn't be surprised to see this loophole closed very soon.

Order yours today!
Just call the number below.
You'll thank me later...

Countering this trend, although difficult, is not an impossible task and it is encouraging that a number of steps are being developed by the actors concerned to do so. Policies being adopted include the following:

- **Improving the management of traditional regular exams:** This can be done by increasing security and transparency as well as the cost of misconduct (e.g. non-payment provision in case of leakage of scripts). Electronic devices can also be used to detect fraud – ICTs can be used to identify "statistically improbable results", especially in schools where marks appear to have risen sharply, as witnessed in the Philippines. There, in one case, five of the six highest scoring schools on a national examination had previously recorded poor results. Plagiarism can also be exposed using software, as in Europe and North America (see: www.turnitin.com).

- **Outsourcing/subcontracting the management of exams to limit outside interference and thus reduce the probability of corruption:** Azerbaijan, for example, now has a Student Admission Commission to fight inefficiencies and distortions in the examination processes. Its higher education admission process is entirely run by computer, from the construction of tests, administration of exams, grading of tests and processing admission to universities to informing candidates of their results.

- **Moving from traditional exams to testing systems:** This approach has been taken up in Kyrgyzstan, where, since 2002, admission to universities is based on the National Scholarship Test (NST), which is run by an independent testing organization. Potential university students now have to sit standardized multiple-choice aptitude tests, which are administered with strict security measures (such as paper scanning and computerized grading). The NST is supported throughout the country, essentially because it has resulted in the fair distribution of scholarships. Its pervasive effect on equity and transparency however is an issue that still needs to be addressed.

CHAPTER 3 : Development of fraud in accreditation and certification processes

A study undertaken in the Ukraine, where there are some 175 accredited private higher education institutions, showed that the main areas of corruption include the large state universities that control licensing and accreditation. Interviews conducted with 43 rectors, vice rectors and administrators from five private universities revealed that successful licensing or accreditation applications, with few exceptions, required some form of bribery; that licensing, mandatory only for private institutions, may require a bribe of US$200 (about two months' salary for a typical academic); and that accreditation might call for a 10 or 20 times greater 'gratuity' (Stetar et al., 2005).

Indeed, accreditation and certification processes worldwide are increasingly being undermined by fraud. Forms of malpractice include the following:

- Payment of bribes to obtain successful certification or accreditation.

- Distortion in the application of the accreditation criteria – admitting below-standard candidates to meet the enrolment criteria (*ex-ante*) or over-grading students to meet achievement criteria *(ex-post)*.

- Accreditation processes based on non-transparent criteria (e.g. rectors having an interest in preventing competition).

- Circumvention of accreditation procedures by higher education providers through franchising schemes or the introduction of the course in segments of the system where accreditation is not compulsory.

- Schools established for the sole purpose of making a profit lying about their accreditation status, thus impeding their students from taking national licensing exams.

- Non-accredited institutions falsely issuing accredited degrees.

- The creation of fraudulent or bogus accreditation agencies (accreditation mills for example, which are at times established by higher education institutions themselves).

The increase of corruption in accreditation is essentially due to four factors: the growing need for certification triggered by the rise of new degree programs and private institutions; accreditation being a sphere in which staff in ministries of education can be guaranteed an income if they engage in unprofessional conduct, particularly in former centrally planned countries; decision-makers having monopoly power, which results in conflicts of interest; and the high stakes involved in accreditation when higher education institutions can 'license' or 'certify' professionals.

The subject of accreditation cannot be treated without mentioning the challenges raised by the spread of distance education, which has been at a scale viewed as a phenomenal in itself. First, measures used to accredit traditional institutions (e.g. number of full-time staff, number of volumes in the research library, amount of time spent by students in class, etc.) are not suitable for online institutions. Secondly, it is very complicated to investigate both higher education institutions and accrediting agencies whose functioning is purely Internet-based. Undoubtedly, there is a need for proper monitoring and control mechanisms. However, some 'business-like higher education institutions' are not willing to provide the necessary funding for this.

Many strategies can be employed to address misconduct in the processes of accreditation overall; including the following:

- **De-linking and reducing the collusion of interest of agents in charge of accrediting institutions:** An efficient means of doing this is to establish autonomous professional bodies, with fair representation of stakeholders (public or private), as in the Netherlands (see *Box 2*). Such institutions must comply with codes of conduct that protect against distorted behaviour such as conflicts of interest.

Box 2 : Accreditation in higher education in the Netherlands

At *national level*:

- Same requirements made for public and private providers.
- Independent judgments and clear sanctions.
- Plurality in methods of quality assessment.
- Accreditation and quality assessment report made public.

At *European level*:

- Creation of the European Consortium for Accreditation.
- Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.
- Introduction of a code of good practice which:
    - must be sufficiently independent from government, higher education institutions, businesses, etc;

> - can demonstrate public accountability by having public and officially available policies, procedures, guidelines and criteria.

- **Separation of the accreditation and the certification processes:** Heyneman (2004) suggests that in the medical field, the process by which individuals leave higher education and apply to practice or be certified in their professions should be separate and outside the realm of higher education institutions: "No matter how excellent, no university should provide a license to practice medicine. This license should be awarded by a board of medical examiners which also manages a system of testing that all medical students must pass. (Similar systems must be established for law, accounting and others.) Key to this new system is to allow many higher education institutions to compete with one another".

- **Facilitating public access to information on accreditation:** Many English-speaking countries in particular have developed directories of courses or institutions accredited by their recognized institutions and approved accrediting agencies. Consequently, a directory of distance-education programs accredited by the Distance Education and Training Council is now available on the Internet at www.detc.org; in the US, the State of Oregon has an Office of Degree Authorization (www.osac.state.or.us); and the State of Michigan compiles a list of unapproved accrediting agencies (www.michigan.gov). Furthermore, the International Association of University Presidents has created a register of reliable accrediting agencies. *Box 3* features the advertisement of an accreditation verification service.

Box 3 *Get-educated.com* **advert**

Diploma Mill Police [SM]

A FREE accreditation verification service for those seeking online and distance learning college degrees

Found an online college or university you like in the U.S.A. but not certain it's accredited by a recognized agency? Not sure of the benefits of attending an accredited degree-granting college? Confused about different types of online college accreditation in the United States?

Check our popular FAQS:

Distance Learning and College Accreditation FAQ

Top 10 Signs You Might Be Dealing with a

Diploma Mill

CHAPTER 4 : New opportunities for fraud offered by the trans-border phenomenon

Targeting fee-paying overseas students is now seen as a lucrative practice, particularly in view of the much documented and deepening financial crisis facing higher education in many countries. In the UK, for instance, less than 10 per cent of foreign undergraduates contribute more to university financing than British and EU scholars combined. Whereas British and EU students pay a little over ₤1000 a year, foreign students are charged anything between ₤8000 and ₤20 000 for the same courses. Cambridge University shows startling statistics in this regard: in 2004, UK and EU students paid ₤20.3 million in fees to the University, while foreign students (under and post graduates), who constituted just 17 per cent of the total number of students enrolled, paid a striking ₤24.6 million in fees (Suroor, 2005). Similar figures can be found in Australia where 100 000 overseas students are estimated to

contribute Aus$2.5 billion annually to the economy. Their fees represent up to two fifths of the budget of some universities.

Given the apparent profitability of cross-border education, pressures to raise funds are encouraging some institutions to resort to corrupt practices to increase foreign student enrolment. This corruption is facilitated by the fact that different people are charged with recruiting, orienting and supporting these students academically. Moreover, the franchising process, which represents a major component of this type of education, also offers numerous possibilities for distorted practices, with consequences such as financial corruption and or professional fraud.

Following are some examples of malpractice in the management of overseas students:

- Overseas students being offered financial incentives to enrol.
- Applicants being given false hope or promised admittance on the spot.
- Applicants not eligible for admissions unduly charged with a variety of fees.
- Applicants using fake credentials to gain admittance.
- Applicants being charged by education agents to falsify documents that qualify them for university entry.
- Indiscriminate recruitment of foreign students as a means of chasing money (fake diplomas, lack of language skills, etc.).
- Bogus institutions that do not deliver the services that they advertise through the media or the web (fictitious or unsustainable institutions that sometimes close down after receipt of money).
- Bogus institutions promising visas to overseas students if they enrol in their courses.

- Agencies and courses without proper accreditation listed on official lists prepared for international students.

- Lowering of academic standards for overseas students (admission, performance, promotion).

- Overseas students being allowed to repeat courses again and again, even when they have no prospect of passing.

Some illustrations of malpractices linked to overseas course franchising are as follows:

- Corrupt officers making money from issuing licenses and franchise rights (collection of fees/bribes from those who want the franchise).

- Assumption made by students enrolling at the franchised institution that since they are paying they will automatically qualify.

- Number of failing students minimized by marking up those at risk of failing and turning a blind eye to plagiarism, as illustrated by a scandal in an off-shore Australian university in Malaysia (see *Box 4* below), etc.

- Pressure from students, parents, the franchisee or the franchising institution on teaching staff to adjust marking standards so that everyone passes the examinations and assessments (in institutions in China, Malaysia and Vietnam, for example).

Box 4 Plagiarism scandal in an off-shore university, Malaysia

Australia's Education Minister raised concerns that a plagiarism scandal involving Malaysian students at an Australian-run university would damage higher education exports worth billions of dollars.

Brendan Nelson urged Newcastle University to reopen a case in which it secretly re-marked the

assignments of 15 students who had been failed for plagiarism at a campus it runs in Malaysia. The 15 were initially awarded zero marks for using unattributed material from the Internet in an assignment, but their former lecturer claims the university overruled his decision because it was concerned about losing revenue from offshore students. The students at the university's graduate school of business in Kuala Lumpur were subsequently issued pass marks, some of them receiving distinctions.

Nelson said the scandal could sully Australia's reputation for high academic standards and damage the booming education sector.

Smith (2003)

Various strategies can be adopted to address the corruption beleaguering trans-border education. However views vary from country to country, as is shown in *Table 4.1* below.

Table 4.1 Regulatory framework for foreign providers of higher education

No regulations: Foreign providers free to operate without seeking permission	Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, Portugal, Russia
Liberal: Minimum conditions only, e.g. outsiders must be recognised in home country	Argentina, Bahrain, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Britain, USA*
Moderately liberal: formal rules, e.g. on curriculum and registration, not burdensome	Australia, Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Hong Kong, Hungary, Israel, Singapore
Becoming more restrictive	India
Liberalising	Japan, South Korea
Very restrictive	Bulgaria, South Africa, Belgium (francophone), Greece

*Varies by state

Source: Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (http://www.obhe.ac.uk/)

More specifically, below are some key strategies identified to address this issue:

- **Designing guidelines and codes of practice pertaining to the recruitment and support of overseas students:** together UNESCO and OECD have paved the way by formulating guidelines for quality in cross-border higher education. They prescribe the following four main policy objectives: Students and learners should be protected from the risks of misinformation, low-quality provision and qualifications of limited validity; qualifications should be readable and transparent in order to increase their international validity and portability; recognition procedures should be transparent, coherent, fair and reliable, and impose as little burden as possible to mobile professionals; and national quality assurance and accreditation agencies need to intensify their international cooperation in order to increase mutual understanding. The Code of good practice in the provision of transnational education, adopted in 2001, is another example (see Appendix).

- **Developing codes of practice and standards of academic integrity for personnel in higher education institutions and overseas students:** this strategy has been adopted by North-western University (USA), where registration of overseas students now requires adherence to codes of conduct and to the University's standards of academic integrity. These codes prohibit the following behaviour: falsification of any portion of the application for admission or financial aid; falsification or alteration of any academic or personal records required for participation; and plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, obtaining an unfair advantage, etc. Students can be withdrawn from the program at any time if they violate the codes or standards or conduct themselves in a way that brings the program into 'disrepute'.

- **Establishing reliable and user-friendly information systems:** there is a need to widely publicize (on websites) recruitment fairs, courses requirements and helplines, as well as rules, regulations and agreements, placement schemes for new students, etc. Furthermore, access to international reference databases on accredited higher education institutions and courses needs to be facilitated. For instance, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) – a coordinating body for higher education accreditation – has created a database with examples of US accreditation obtained by higher education institutions located in 31 different countries. In addition, information could be made available to guide interested applicants for overseas studies on reliability, quality and standards – the example of South Africa can be considered in this respect. Finally, systems to penalise institutions providing unreliable and fake information could be established.

CHAPTER 5 : Concluding remarks

Academic fraud is a relatively new area of concern. This brief reflective paper is centred on training, but it must be stressed that the entire domain of knowledge, including research and development, is under pressure from corruption. Competition for scarce resources and the vulnerability of unpredictable resources (public and private) have resulted in more risks, for instance in non-compliance to the rules in the procedures for procuring research funds or in the increased probability of bias in favour of research areas which target clients with high absorptive capacities, especially when economic interests are high, such as in the pharmaceutical industry.

It is assumed that the persisting growth in the demand for higher education services coupled with the multiplicity of agencies involved in the market as well as the lack of regularization will sustain the pressure for more distorted practices. Fortunately, and as a direct consequence, a trend for more transparency, accountability and ethics is simultaneously on the rise. This movement demands not only more regulation, but also design of codes of conduct, training to fight academic fraud, better access to reliable information, separating examinations from access to jobs, etc.

Strategies to improve transparency in quality assurance systems particularly rely on the development of reliable information systems which list accredited higher education institutions, recognised accrediting agencies, as well as diploma mills, non-accredited institutions and unapproved accrediting agencies. Information systems on rules and regulations applied to overseas students and franchised courses or institutions can also play a key role in helping to make the system more ethical. This requires funding in the development and maintenance of reliable information systems that are easy to access, user friendly, regularly updated and free of charge. Information campaigns to raise awareness among users about the existence of such information systems may also be useful.

To avoid possible collusion or conflict of interests at local or national level, there may be a need to design adequate mechanisms at international level in order to ensure the neutrality of data. As shown in this presentation, some positive initial steps are being taken at national, regional (EU) and international (WTO, UNESCO) levels aimed at better monitoring accountability, helping to make advancements in this area.

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- At http://www.unesco.org/iiep/eng/focus/etico/etico1.html you can also visit our information platform, ETICO, which was created within the framework of the project.

- Do not hesitate to share with us useful references to projects, papers, articles, events, etc. We will be happy to collaborate with you!

Appendix 1:

Code of good practice in the provision of transnational education (Section II. Principles)

1. Transnational arrangements should be so elaborated, enforced and monitored as to widen the access to higher education studies, fully respond to the learners' educational demands, contribute to their cognitive, cultural, social, personal and professional development, and comply with the national legislation regarding higher education in both receiving and sending countries. In the case of collaborative arrangements there should be written and legally binding agreements or contracts setting out the rights and obligations of all partners.

2. Academic quality and standards of transnational education programmes should be at least comparable to those of the awarding institution as well as to those of the receiving country. Awarding institutions as well as the providing institutions are accountable and fully responsible for quality assurance and control. Procedures and decisions concerning the quality of educational services provided by transnational arrangements should be based on specific criteria, which are transparent, systematic and open to scrutiny.

3. The policy and the mission statement of institutions established through transnational arrangements, their management structures and educational facilities, as well as **the goals, objectives and contents** of specific programmes, sets of courses of study, and other educational services, should be published, and made available upon request to the authorities and beneficiaries from both the sending and receiving countries.

4. Information given by the awarding institution, providing organization, or agent to prospective students and to those registered on a study programme established through transnational arrangements should be appropriate, accurate, consistent and reliable. The information should include directions to students about the appropriate channels for particular

concerns, complains and appeals. Where a programme is delivered through a collaborative arrangement, the nature of that arrangement and the responsibilities of the parties should be clearly outlined. The awarding institution is responsible for and should control and monitor information made public by agents operating on its behalf, including claims about the recognition of the qualifications in the sending country, and elsewhere.

5. Staff members of the institutions or those teaching on the programmes established through transnational arrangements should be proficient in terms of qualifications, teaching, research and other professional experience. The awarding institution should ensure that it has in place effective measures to review the proficiency of staff delivering programmes that lead to its qualifications.

6. Transnational education arrangements should encourage the awareness and knowledge of the **culture and customs** of both the awarding institutions and receiving country among the students and staff.

7. The awarding institution should be responsible for the **agents** it, or its partner institutions, appoint to act on its behalf. Institutions using agents should conclude written and legally binding agreements or contracts with these, clearly stipulating their roles, responsibilities, delegated powers of action as well as monitoring, arbitration and termination provisions. These agreements or contracts should further be established with a view to avoiding conflicts of interests as well as the rights of students with regard to their studies.

8. Awarding institutions should be responsible for issuing the qualifications resulting from their transnational study programmes. They should provide clear and transparent information on the qualifications, in particular through the use of the Diploma Supplement, facilitating the assessment of the qualifications by competent recognition bodies, the higher education

institutions, employers and others. This information should include the nature, duration, workload, location and language(s) of the study programme leading to the qualifications.

9. The admission of students for a course of study, **the teaching/learning activities, the examination and assessment requirements** for educational services provided under transnational arrangements should be equivalent to those of the same or comparable programmes delivered by the awarding institution.

10. The academic workload in transnational study programmes expressed in credits, units, duration of studies or otherwise, should be that of comparable programmes in the awarding institution, any difference in this respect requiring a clear statement on its rationale and its consequences for the recognition of qualifications.

11. Qualifications issued through transnational educational programmes, complying with the provisions of the present Code, should be assessed in accordance with the stipulations of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

(http://www.cepes.ro/hed/recogn/groups