1. A critical introduction to academic corruption

Elena Denisova-Schmidt

Corruption is as old as civilization itself. All world religions discuss it in one way or another, as does classical literature including Dante Alighieri (*c.* 1308 and *c.* 1320) and William Shakespeare (1604 and 1605) and even guides on etiquette, such as the Russian *Domostroi* (sixteenth century) or the German *Knigge* (1788). According to Charles Darwin, the ability to mislead, trick, or otherwise deceive others is an important aspect of natural selection, passed on to successive generations through evolution (Darwin, 1859, 1871, cited in Stephens, 2019). Corruption as a field of inquiry has been the subject of active research since the early 1990s. This research trend is often explained by the end of the Cold War, the rise of democracy and the free press in many countries. This has been especially evident in Eastern Europe. International organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, as well as the flagship NGO Transparency International (TI), have also been influential in targeting corruption worldwide (Tanzi, 1998). Declared "the greatest evil facing the world since communism" in 2006 by then-World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz (Heywood, 2016, p. 10), corruption still remains an urgent topic among decision-makers, scholars, and practitioners around the world, even after the rise of terrorism, 9/11, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic (see the speech by then-US President Joseph Biden during the first Summit for Democracy, held virtually on 9 and 10 December 2021, or the State of the Union Address by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, given in Brussels on 14 September 2022).

The *Handbook on Corruption in Higher Education* is the culmination of more than 30 years of intensive research on corruption within the context of higher education. Universities require honesty that stems from the commitment of a community of scholars and students and a culture of research based on demonstrable truths. This culture of honesty is supported by a tradition of peer review and the open analysis of society's most important issues. Thus, when corruption enters academe—whether with direct or indirect student involvement, monetary or non-monetary, complex or obvious actions, cheating in examinations, plagiarism, academic promotions, student admissions, or financial crimes—it is particularly damaging to academic culture and the very essence of the academic enterprise itself. This behavior might be conscious or unconscious; it might even be even well intentioned but, in any case, it leads to reputational damage and distrust in higher education among society in general. This

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Handbook provides a global perspective on academic corruption by discussing how it presents, the underlying issues involved, and by providing relevant case studies.

ON TERMINOLOGY

The study of what has been termed "academic corruption" or "corruption in higher education" is strongly associated with its founding father, Stephen P. Heyneman. Before entering academia, Heyneman worked for the World Bank, helping to design and implement education policies in many countries around the globe from 1976 to 1998 (Vanderbilt University Press, 2024). His main motivation to address corruption came from what he observed during his consulting work and his visits to various higher education institutions worldwide. Cheating among college students had previously been discussed in the United States and globally (Atkins & Atkins, 1936; Barnes, 1904; Bowers, 1964; Denisova-Schmidt, 2023a; Fishman, 2023; Harp & Taietz, 1966; Healy & Bronner, 1933; Kirk, 1970; Knowlton & Hamerlynck, 1967), but Heyneman learned about money in exchange for grades (bribes), sex in exchange for grades (sextortion as defined by the International Association of Women Judges, cf. Cvetanoska, 2024), and informal (oral) commands—situations in which, for example, the dean or another senior university official instructs faculty members to change grades in favor of some students (Heyneman, 2004). Informality has also been discussed in the *Global Encyclopaedia of Informality* (Ledeneva, 2018, 2024).

Heyneman was instrumental in establishing the field of academic corruption studies with his 2004 essay, "Education and Corruption" (2004). In addition to the common definitions of the time, such as "the abuse of authority for material gain" (Heyneman, 2004, p. 637), Heyneman emphasized the special role of universities and their importance in modeling behaviors, especially for young people. He also emphasized their responsibility to society at large and expanded the definition of corruption to include "the abuse of authority for personal gain" and "professional misconduct", focusing on faculty and staff (see later discussions in Heyneman, 2009, 2013; Heyneman et al., 2008; Sabic-El-Rayess & Heyneman, 2020).

It should be noted, however, that the study of professional misconduct (Braxton and Bayer, 1999) or more broadly, the lack of academic integrity, is strongly associated with another founding father from the USA, Donald McCabe (1944–2016), who not only shaped the field (McCabe, 1992, 1997; McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2012; McCabe & Trevino, 1997; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001, 2002, to name a few of his works), but most notably institutionalized the concept in 1992 with the founding of the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) in the US. There, he consolidated other enthusiastic experts "to combat cheating, plagiarism, and academic dishonesty in higher education" (ICAI, 2023; Fishman, 2023). It is interesting to note that his motivation resulted from what he observed in his professional career, but in contrast to Heyneman, his work was mainly shaped by domestic experience—the discrepancy between his experience in secondary education during the 1950s, where cheating was almost business as usual, and his university experience, where he

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was suddenly confronted with explicit instructions such as the Princeton honor code that requires an affirmation of non-cheating and reporting of any cheating observed (cf. Gallant, 2022).

Today, scholars and practitioners working on corruption in higher education often view it as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (Transparency International) and as a lack of academic integrity. This definition applies to everyone involved in higher education, from students and faculty members to staff and other stakeholders at both public and private universities, because education is considered a public good. The difference between the perception of corruption and real corruption, important in many other areas, is less relevant for higher education since the reputational damage is done regardless of whether guilt is manifest or not (Heyneman, 2013; Denisova-Schmidt, 2020a, 2020b, 2025a).

In general, the terms "academic corruption" and "academic integrity" are sometimes difficult to work with. Both are umbrella terms that cover many different activities (see the "Global Corruption Report: Education", edited by Sweeney, Despota, and Lindner on behalf of TI in 2013; the recently published second edition of the *Handbook of Academic Integrity*, edited by Eaton in 2024; or the multilingual *Glossary for Academic Integrity*, edited by Tauginienė and colleagues in 2018 with more than 200 entries). Second, the concept of academic integrity in the sense of moral principles and obligations does not exist in many languages and academic cultures; not every stakeholder involved in higher education would fully grasp these discussions. Academic integrity was mentioned as one of the academic values by the European ministers in the Bologna meeting in 2024 (see my earlier call for it in Denisova-Schmidt, 2018). Third, while the concept of academic corruption exists in almost all languages and academic cultures, it has mainly negative connotations. Not every stakeholder, especially decision-makers (e.g., ministers of education or university rectors), would be eager to talk about effectively preventing and successfully managing corruption as it would mean publicly acknowledging its existence. Yet such public and academic discussions are needed now more than ever in these times of polarization, fake news, and the uncritical and non-reflected (mis)use of artificial intelligence (AI). The rise of AI tools in higher education has spurred a still-nascent, yet already complex dialogue about their ethical use. The inherent indistinguishability of AI-generated content from human-produced work presents well-known risks (Foltynek et al., 2023), just like the ability of AI and its users to evade plagiarism checkers like Turnitin (Keith, 2023). Furthermore, as the capabilities and application of technology continue to advance more rapidly than institutional discourse and policy responses can adapt (Perkins & Roe, 2023), traditional misconduct definitions are likely to be tested and may be rendered obsolete by the emergence of new AI-supported forms of illicit practice. Compare the discussions on essay writing that range from allowing to forbidding AI and even eliminating this type of assessment altogether.

Academia presents unique challenges for corruption studies. Not all scholars and practitioners in corruption studies label plagiarism or student cheating as corruption. Conversely, some scholars are perhaps too enthusiastic in their application of

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the term, viewing as corrupt those universities that add a high percentage to third-party grants for "overhead" or professors who ask students to write the first draft of their own recommendation letters (Denisova-Schmidt, 2020b). And yet, even aside from these gray areas, academia is faced with pervasive problems in the realm of academic dishonesty, cheating, professional misconduct, plagiarism, fake degrees and universities, preferential treatment for access and promotion, a lack of academic integrity, and other unethical behaviors. Scholars working on corruption in higher education must possess a deep knowledge of the academic systems they are researching in order to create appropriate designs for studies that ask the right questions and, most importantly, adequately interpret the results. On the other hand, they must not be viewed by their colleagues and other stakeholders as traitors or offenders who are judging their behavior. As higher education becomes further commodified, the potential for corruption will also grow as educational institutions benefit from receiving state or industry funding and, as a result, are willing to overlook rigorous academic requirements to enhance their profits. Such practices can degrade the quality of higher education generally and increase public distrust in one of society's most important social institutions.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE NEXT?

It is crucial to develop the theory of corruption further to reflect the complexity of our world and the ambivalence about many dubious practices, while at the same time seeking out innovative approaches for mitigating dishonesty, even in endemically dishonest environments. Students commit fraud by cheating not only because of their questionable moral principles, but also because they have to compensate for the deficits of their secondary school education, or even because they are victims of modern slavery. Faculty members and university administrators might ignore cheating or demand bribes not only because they can misuse the power entrusted to them for private gain, but also because of the peculiarities of national academic systems that depend on a stable number of students, or the growing importance of ranking and the lessening value placed on teaching in an academic career path.

In 2019, international media reported on several cases in which the children of famous US actors and corporate executives were discovered to have been admitted to some of the country's top universities as student athletes through a series of fraudulent schemes, known as the Varsity Blues scandal. It should be no surprise that some parents will intervene to leverage opportunities to benefit their child's future career, sometimes crossing the ethical line by falsifying exam results, inventing sports achievements, or even paying bribes to get their kids admitted to prestigious colleges (Denisova-Schmidt, 2023b).

The list of ambivalent practices is long, with many examples. Who are the international students using unethical agents to gain enrollment at universities abroad—naïve and inexperienced victims or intelligent and refined offenders? Who are the students paying a bribe in order to enroll? What if this is the only way to become a

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university student in their home country? Or do students not pay a bribe because they are experiencing a moral dilemma or just because they cannot afford it or know how to proceed?

Finally, the entire research agenda on corruption in higher education would benefit enormously from closer cooperation between scholars and practitioners around the world, as well as from studies conducted and published in languages other than English.

SCOPE OF THE HANDBOOK

The *Handbook on Corruption in Higher Education* encompasses empirical as well as conceptual contributions from scholars and practitioners. The topics include, but are not limited to, academic misconduct, cheating, bribery, fraud, e-dishonesty, and other malpractice among students, faculty members, university administrators, and other actors involved in (international) higher education. These other actors provide language and other tests, credential evaluation, visa applications, and more. In her chapter, Irene Glendinning presents a very good overview of various forms and areas of corruption, while Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal and Brigid Freeman outline the taxonomies of academic corruption in their contribution.

When inviting potential authors, the editors were interested in assembling a wide variety of theoretical frameworks and approaches. Therefore, the book includes contributions based on the bad-apple mythology (A. J. Angulo), new public management and institutional corruption (Cris Shore), rent-seeking theory (Agustian Sutrisno), second-order corruption and Goodhart's law (Ellen Hazelkorn), among other well-known and established theories and approaches. We were also glad to include authors who are developing new theories, such as the epistemology of corruption suggested by Amra Sabic-El-Rayess and Vikramaditya (Vik) Joshi. We questioned some established and widely used measurement tools like the "Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)", highlighting its limits, but we also acknowledged its helpfulness as a guideline by which to assess perceived degrees of corruption in society, including in higher education (Anthony Welch).

We sought out diverse research techniques—qualitative and quantitative tools as well as experiments—that can be applied to the analysis of corruption and the lack of academic integrity. We also included remedies and measures that can be used to combat and mitigate unethical issues in academia. The chapter by Ling Wang, Rui Yang, and Yanzhen Zhu, for example, is based on semi-structured interviews, while the chapter by Tatiana Karabchuk and Aizhan Shomotova uses an online survey. In her chapter, Elena Denisova-Schmidt relies on several experiments she conducted together with her colleagues. Christopher Bohlens discusses a self-audit checklist for universities developed by Transparency International Germany, and Mihaylo Milovanovitch examines the Integrity of Education Systems (INTES) methodology developed by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)—two very important remedies developed within international

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organizations highlighting the crucial role of international organizations in mitigating corruption. The local, national, and institutional context is particularly important for understanding corruption and addressing it more efficiently, as in the case of academic inbreeding (Maria Yudkevich), contract cheating (Guy J. Curtis and Cath Ellis), peer review (A. J. Angulo and Megan Hadley), scientific fraud (Andrei A. Rostovtsev, Mikhail S. Gelfand, & Larisa G. Melikhova), and state capture (Jonathan D. Jansen). It is also crucial to reflect on corruption and anti-corruption in higher education from global and long-term perspectives (Stephen P. Heyneman), especially in the post-plagiarism era (Sarah Elaine Eaton), as well as to describe the status quo of higher education with its current challenges and opportunities—the context that provides the fruitful ground for "the greatest evil facing the world" of academia (Philip G. Altbach and Hans de Wit).

Any rigorous conception of corruption requires "standards of goodness"—that is, a set of values and principles for people and institutions to uphold and that corruption of various sorts undermines (Rose-Ackerman, 1978). Standards of goodness for higher education include establishing and protecting academic and intellectual values, asserting and defending those values against outside interests yet subjecting them to assessment and reevaluation, and acting in ways to uphold and strengthen those values. These standards are becoming difficult to meet as the academy loses its autonomy.

The first part of this *Handbook* addresses the intervention of outside interests and values—political interventions, the rankings game, commercial and entrepreneurial pursuits—and those from within, driven by individual self-interest at various levels of the academy, often originating with ambitious administrators whose grasp of academic values is eclipsed by personal image building. The second part deals with various cases within different national and cultural contexts. The countries presented here are not more corrupt than other countries; rather, they are simply more researched thanks to the contributors and more open to controversial consideration than other regions. In some academic cultures, rules and laws may be selective and individuals may be treated differently depending on their social group or status (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). Certain unethical practices may be condemned less where corruption is endemic and more urgent problems require attention; and individuals may operate according to conflicting moral codes by claiming to hate corruption while also finding reasons to indulge in it.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first *Handbook on Corruption in Higher Education*. The *Handbook* is broad in terms of topics and geography, diverse in including scholars and practitioners from different disciplines and stages of their careers, and innovative on various theoretical frameworks and methodologies. The editors hope that this *Handbook* will be reviewed in the field of international higher education and beyond.

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