



IIEP Visiting Researcher Notes

Protecting trust in higher education:
Evidence on corruption and its policy
implications

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Introduction

Higher education sits at the intersection of high stakes and high discretion. It allocates life-changing opportunities through admissions and scholarships; it certifies knowledge and skills through assessment and credentials; it distributes prestige, funding, and careers through hiring, promotion, and research evaluation. As systems expand, compete internationally, and rely more heavily on metrics and digital platforms, the space for unethical practices widens – sometimes through overt misconduct, and often through subtle forms of ‘gaming’ that become normalized when indicators become targets and when accountability is uneven.

Corruption in this context is not only a matter of individual wrongdoing. It frequently reflects systemic conditions: misaligned incentives, opaque decision-making, weak oversight, and institutional cultures that tolerate rule-bending under pressure. These dynamics can distort teaching and learning by undermining the integrity of assessment and the credibility of qualifications. They can deepen inequities by privileging those with money, networks, or influence. They can weaken public trust by turning governance into a contest over reputation and control rather than a commitment to transparent, fair, and mission-driven decision-making. They also create new transnational risks such as contract cheating markets, paper mills, bogus providers, and credential fraud, which outpace the capacity of institutions to respond.

This note synthesizes evidence and arguments from the *Handbook on Corruption in Higher Education* (2025) in order to support policy dialogue and planning. It organizes insights around IIEP-UNESCO’s six priorities, namely: Learning, Equity, Transparency, Technology, Resilience, and Skills, highlighting how integrity can be treated as a core component of education system strengthening. Rather than approaching corruption as a stand-alone compliance problem, the note emphasizes integrity system design: protecting academic values and autonomy, hardening governance ‘chokepoints’ such as admissions and procurement, aligning incentives with public purpose, and building the institutional and regulatory capacities needed to implement reforms credibly and sustainably.

Key takeaways across IIEP’s six thematic priorities

LEARNING — Planning and management to improve learning

Corruption in higher education becomes visible where it matters most: in the credibility of teaching, research, and service. A workable approach starts from the framing that corruption can only be understood against ‘standards of goodness’ (Rose-Ackerman, 1978), the academic and public values that higher education is meant to protect (Denisova-Schmidt, 2025). When these standards are weakened, the legitimacy of research is put at risk alongside learning outcomes because the rules that govern who enters, who advances, who gets funded, and whose work is recognized become open to manipulation. Ranking incentives can further pull leadership attention toward optimizing ranking indicators, encouraging gaming and data manipulation rather than improving pedagogy, student support, and research innovation (Hazelkorn, 2025).

Admissions integrity is a learning prerequisite: rent-seeking in admissions alters who participates and undermines trust in the entire learning pathway (Sutrisno, 2025). The link between integrity and learning standards is made explicit through quality assurance (QA) mechanisms, which stresses implementation capacity, monitoring, and community buy-in as necessary conditions for real change (Glendinning, 2025).

Learning quality is also shaped by the integrity of knowledge production. When peer review is weakened in an environment shaped by misinformation dynamics, incentives for speed and visibility can distort publication and evaluation, affecting the reliability of knowledge that informs teaching and professional training (Angulo & Hadley, 2025). Scientific fraud illustrates how incentives and weak enforcement can contaminate the research base and normalize unethical practices that ultimately affect standards (Rostovtsev et al., 2025). Acceptance of misconduct at university level further erodes learning cultures when sanctions are inconsistent and compliance is simulated rather than internalized (Denisova-Schmidt, 2025b). In contexts where incentive structures are experienced as rigid or punitive, unethical practices may be rationalized as

unavoidable, highlighting how institutional design shapes everyday academic choices (Wang et al., 2025).

Finally, assessment integrity is central to learning integrity. Contract cheating turns assessment into a purchasable service; it breaks the link between what students know and what credentials certify, weakening both feedback for learning and the social value of qualifications (Curtis & Ellis, 2025). The rise of mainstream generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools adds a new layer: when AI use shifts from legitimate support to substitution, the educational purpose of assessment is undermined unless expectations and task design are updated (Karabchuk & Shomotova, 2025). Integrity enforcement itself can also drift away from learning if it becomes driven by reputational politics; integrity becomes performative when institutions prioritize moral signalling over fair procedures, learning, and improvement (Eaton, 2025).

Learning improvement in higher education requires integrity to be treated as learning infrastructure – including transparent admissions, auditable progression decisions, secure assessment, and trustworthy staffing and promotion systems – supported by QA mechanisms that validate implementation rather than policy existence (Glendinning, 2025).

EQUITY — Planning and management for equity, gender equality and inclusion in education

Corruption redistributes opportunity toward money, networks, and power, creating a hidden inequality tax in access, progression, and recognition. Denisova-Schmidt's (2025a) value-based framing makes clear that equity is not peripheral: corruption violates the public purpose of higher education by undermining merit, fairness, and legitimate. Where corrupt practices become normalized, the disadvantage faced by marginalized groups is compounded, because they have fewer protective resources and a greater exposure to coercion.

Equity harms are most direct at high-stakes entry points. Rent-seeking in admissions turns access into a 'rent', excluding those without connections and undermining the legitimacy of selection (Sutrisno, 2025). Governance complexity can multiply such vulnerability points: in India, corruption risks are linked to multi-level structures and uneven oversight, creating differential burdens across institutions and learners (Sabharwal & Freeman, 2025). Similarly, variation across the Asia-Pacific shows how regulatory failure and sector structure shape who is protected and who is exposed (Welch, 2025).

Equity is also affected by what counts as knowledge and who is heard. The epistemic violence perspective identifies corruption as harm that includes silencing, exclusion, and distortion of whose knowledge counts, with implications for student belonging, participation, and long-term social trust (Sabic-El-Rayess & Joshi, 2025). Staffing and advancement practices can reproduce inequity when closed networks dominate. Academic inbreeding can entrench favouritism and limit mobility and diversity, shaping teaching, mentorship, and curriculum breadth (Yudkevich, 2025).

System incentives can quietly undermine equity goals. Ranking and metric regimes can shift institutional priorities toward resource-intensive outputs and reputational optimization, crowding out inclusion-focused investments and producing second-order inequities (Hazelkorn, 2025). Marketization and commercialization may also reorder priorities toward revenue and branding, potentially weakening protections and supports for vulnerable students (Shore, 2025). The US for-profit sector analysis shows how structural incentives – rather than isolated 'bad actors' – can generate systematic harms that disproportionately affect disadvantaged learners, making equity inseparable from provider regulation and financing rules (Angulo, 2025).

Corruption can also take the form of coercive, non-monetary harms, and power hierarchies may pressure individuals to comply with unethical demands highlighting the need for safe reporting channels and robust protection mechanisms (Heyneman, 2025).

Equity strategies should explicitly identify integrity risks to inclusion, such as discretionary admissions pathways, biased enforcement, retaliation, and epistemic exclusion. They should then harden processes through transparency, appeals, and protection systems that make equity enforceable rather than aspirational.

TRANSPARENCY — Promoting good governance and transparency in educational management and financing

Transparency is presented as a core condition for reducing corruption, but transparency alone is not enough; it must be paired with credible accountability and procedural fairness. Corruption persists where rules are unclear, decisions are discretionary and unaudited, and oversight is weak. The ‘standards of goodness’ (Rose-Ackerman, 1978) framing implies that transparency is needed to make values operational: integrity depends on clear responsibilities, legitimate processes, and the ability to verify decisions (Denisova-Schmidt, 2025a). Good governance in appointments, admissions, promotions, and internal controls is essential for integrity, which depends on continuous implementation and monitoring rather than one-time reforms (Glendinning, 2025).

‘Policy on paper’ refers to situations where integrity initiatives become compliance theatre, where institutional incentives reward appearances. Reputational dynamics can weaponize integrity debates; performative moral signalling can crowd out fair procedures and genuine improvement (Eaton, 2025). Similar concerns arise when anti-corruption measures are adopted in a highly visible way but fail to address underlying drivers or norms of acceptance, leaving many grey areas difficult to identify and navigate (Denisova-Schmidt, 2025b).

Transparency challenges are intensified by incentive regimes and financing structures. Rankings pressures can encourage manipulation of data and narratives, meaning independent auditability and data governance are crucial to accountability (Hazelkorn, 2025). Marketization and financialization increase contractual complexity and exposure to potential conflicts of interest, meaning stronger governance is required for procurement, partnerships, and outsourced services (Shore, 2025). In the US for-profit context, recurring fraud and misrepresentation are explained through systemic incentives and oversight weaknesses, pointing to the need for stronger accreditation accountability and funding eligibility rules (Angulo, 2025).

The shared classification of illicit practices can enable risk mapping and monitoring by focusing on failures in core deliverables such as access, quality, fair decisions, and proper use of resources where distrust accumulates (Milovanovitch, 2025). Germany’s approach emphasizes prevention architecture: transparency, accountability mechanisms, ethics training, and institutional self-audits detect and reduce vulnerabilities (Bohlens, 2025). South Africa’s micropolitics analysis shows that governance reforms must anticipate capture and retaliation risks; transparency must be accompanied by protections and credible investigative processes (Jansen, 2025).

Research integrity reinforces that transparency about investigations, sanctions, and corrections is essential for trust rebuilding (Rostovtsev et al., 2025), and peer review governance similarly depends on conflict-of-interest management and clear procedures (Angulo & Hadley, 2025). A concrete transparency lever is to publish internal survey results and leverage credible external accreditation consequences (Heyneman, 2025).

Strengthening transparency requires strengthening systems – auditable decision processes, independent oversight, protected reporting, and fair investigations – designed to withstand market and ranking pressures, as well as internal political dynamics.

TECHNOLOGY — Enhancing digital technology to transform education

Digital technology transforms higher education, but it also changes the integrity risk landscape. Technology can support traceability and transparency, yet it also enables scalable misconduct that operates beyond institutional jurisdiction. The standards-and-quality perspective highlights tech-enabled global threats such as essay mills, paper mills, credential fraud, bogus providers,

predatory publishing, thus underscoring the need for coordinated responses rather than isolated campus policies (Glendinning, 2025).

Contract cheating shows how digital platforms professionalize and scale corruption in assessment, creating deniability and undermining credibility (Curtis & Ellis, 2025). AI makes these challenges mainstream: student use of AI tools can be educationally beneficial, but it can also substitute for learning unless norms, disclosure expectations, and assessment design are updated (Karabchuk & Shomotova, 2025). These dynamics imply that digital transformation includes integrity by design: authentic assessment, supervision practices, identity verification proportionality, and secure records systems.

Technology affects research integrity and knowledge validation as well. Peer review vulnerability in a misinformation-shaped environment is linked to incentive structures and the digital attention economy, which can distort evaluation and publication (Angulo & Hadley, 2025). The prevalence of scientific fraud illustrates how systemic incentives and weak enforcement can scale misconduct, contaminating the scholarly record in ways that digital dissemination accelerates (Rostovtsev et al., 2025). Integrity discourse can also be amplified and distorted online; reputational dynamics can lead to overreach or weaponization, making due process and proportional responses critical (Eaton, 2025).

System dynamics matter for technology governance. Expansion and internationalization widen the number of intermediaries and cross-border arrangements that institutions must manage (Altbach & de Wit, 2025). Rankings pressures can incentivize metric gaming facilitated by digital reporting infrastructures (Hazelkorn, 2025). Marketisation may increase reliance on outsourced platforms and services, heightening data governance and contractual risks (Shore, 2025). Context also matters: regulatory capacity gaps and governance failures help explain why tech-enabled misconduct persists in many systems (Welch, 2025).

Digital transformation strategies should explicitly include integrity requirements: AI use guidance, assessment redesign, secure data/records systems, and oversight of third party platforms and intermediaries paired with capacity building for staff and regulators to respond as technology changes.

RESILIENCE — Planning and management for crises, climate change, and natural hazards

Resilience in higher education depends not only on infrastructure and contingency plans but also on legitimacy and trust. Corruption weakens resilience by eroding confidence in decision-making and by making systems more vulnerable to capture, especially during shocks when scarcity and urgency increase discretion. Denisova-Schmidt (2025a) frames corruption as an urgent policy issue even amid major global crises, indicating that shocks can magnify integrity risks rather than displace them. Expansion pressures and competition already strain oversight. Crises add new openings for opaque procurement, compromised assessments, and politically influenced decisions (Altbach & de Wit, 2025).

Integrity reform is described as long-term work requiring leadership commitment, monitoring, and buy-in, all conditions that determine whether systems remain stable under disruption (Glendinning, 2025). Internal power dynamics can undermine resilience: micropolitics and capture risks in South African universities show how institutional governance can be contested and exploited, with integrity failures gradually embedding themselves and diverting attention from core mission (Jansen, 2025). Financing and governance structures also influence resilience: marketisation and unbundling can increase opacity and contractual complexity, making accountability harder during rapid decision-making (Shore, 2025).

Contextual variation matters for resilience planning. Regulatory weakness and uneven oversight contribute to persistent corruption risks in multiple Asia-Pacific settings, implying that resilience requires strengthening system-level governance capacity (Welch, 2025). Normalized misconduct and weak enforcement in post-Soviet contexts also undermine trust and make systems brittle; visible rules without credible consequences encourage simulation rather than resilience (Denisova-Schmidt, 2025b; Rostovtsev et al., 2025). Complex systems with uneven implementation

capacity also face resilience challenges, as shown in the India policy practice analysis (Sabharwal & Freeman, 2025).

Resilience is social and psychological as well. Epistemic violence links corruption to harms that reduce belonging and participation, suggesting that resilience depends on systems that protect learners and staff from coercion and exclusion (Sabic-El-Rayess & Joshi, 2025). Practical resilience levers include credible external accountability (e.g., accreditation consequences), transparent publication of internal evidence, and standardized exams to reduce leakage and rebuild trust over time (Heyneman, 2025).

Crisis sensitive higher education planning should include continuity of oversight, emergency procurement transparency, protected reporting during disruptions, and secure remote assessment protocols. Resilience also requires governance designs that withstand leadership turnover and political contestation while sustaining integrity as a system norm.

SKILLS — Ensuring skills for the future and the transition to work

Skills development and the transition to work depend on the credibility of higher education credentials as signals of competence. Corruption breaks this link by enabling purchased performance, distorted selection, or fraudulent research foundations. Denisova-Schmidt (2025a) ties corruption to trust and public purpose, implying that corruption undermines human capital strategies by weakening legitimacy and long-term system performance.

Corruption in assessments directly undermines how well skills are demonstrated and recognized. Contract cheating converts assessment into a service market, producing credentials that may not reflect competencies (Curtis & Ellis, 2025). AI intensifies the challenge: without clear norms and redesigned tasks, students can present AI-generated work as their own, reducing the reliability of demonstrated skills (Karabchuk & Shomotova, 2025). Rankings and performance metrics can further distort skills agendas if institutions prioritize reputational outputs over learning quality and student support, shifting effort toward metric optimization rather than skill formation (Hazelkorn, 2025).

Research integrity supports advanced and professional skills by ensuring that learners and practitioners rely on credible evidence. Weak peer review and misinformation dynamics can distort what counts as reliable knowledge, influencing curricula and professional training (Angulo & Hadley, 2025). Scientific fraud can become systemic where incentives reward volume and enforcement is weak; this contaminates the scholarly record and can damage academic labour markets and professional standards (Rostovtsev et al., 2025). University-level acceptance of misconduct further undermines institutions' capacities to guarantee competence (Denisova-Schmidt, 2025b).

The US for-profit analysis shows how structural incentives can generate systematic misrepresentation and poor outcomes; weak accountability allows credentials with limited labour-market value to proliferate, often harming disadvantaged learners (Angulo, 2025a). Labour-market consequences can be quantified: efforts to estimate the monetary and employment penalties associated with exposure to corruption, and with attending corrupt institutions, underscore why integrity is a core economic development concern (Heyneman, 2025).

Other system features influence skill formation. Hiring practices, including inbreeding, affect teaching and mentorship quality (Yudkevich, 2025). Marketisation and financing structures affect investment in student support and quality inputs (Shore, 2025). Admissions rent-seeking compromises skills pipelines before learning begins (Sutrisno, 2025). Variation across India and Asia-Pacific cases shows that credible skills pathways require governance and implementation capacity, not only curriculum reform (Sabharwal & Freeman, 2025; Welch, 2025).

Skills strategies should pair relevance and curriculum reform with integrity safeguards in assessment, credentialing, and provider accountability. Financing and QA systems should reward verified learning and honest reporting, while regulation addresses intermediaries and transnational fraud markets that undermine credential trust.

Conclusion and outlook

In IIEP-UNESCO's priorities, integrity emerges as a decisive enabler of performance. Learning suffers when assessment can be purchased, outsourced, or substituted, and when institutional energy shifts from pedagogy to metric management. Equity suffers when access is shaped by rent-seeking and when marginalized groups face coercion, retaliation, or exclusionary practices. Transparency and good governance suffer when policies exist only on paper and accountability is diluted by reputational politics, market pressures, or internal micropolitics. Technology can strengthen traceability and widen access, yet it also accelerates contract cheating, AI-enabled substitution, and cross-border fraud markets. Resilience depends not only on continuity plans, but also on legitimacy and trust, both of which are fragile where corruption is tolerated. Skills and employability depend on credible credentials; when trust collapses, education loses both its signalling power in the labour market and its broader developmental value.

In this context, the integrity agenda in higher education is likely to intensify over the coming decade for three reasons.

- Firstly, financing pressures and metric-driven competition will continue to push systems toward performative accountability. Rankings, strategic leadership imperatives, and marketisation can incentivize gaming and distort decision-making. The real test will be whether transparency tools such as audits, disclosure, QA reviews, public reporting, are matched with meaningful consequences, fair procedures, and protection against retaliation, so integrity reforms strengthen systems rather than become symbolic exercises.
- Second, integrity threats are increasingly transnational and commercialized. Contract cheating, credential fraud, and paper-mill dynamics operate across borders and often beyond the reach of any single institution. Effective responses will depend on coordinated frameworks – shared definitions, compatible reporting categories, and practical cooperation among ministries, quality assurance bodies, and, where appropriate, enforcement actors.
- Third, generative AI and platformization will redefine what trustworthy learning looks like. The question is no longer whether AI will be present in higher education, but how systems will distinguish legitimate educational use from unacceptable substitution. This will require assessment redesign for authenticity, clearer guidance for students and staff, and safeguards that protect equity and due process while maintaining academic standards.

Integrity is not an add-on to higher education reform: it is the condition that makes reforms deliver real learning, fair opportunity, and credible qualifications. The most durable progress will come from redesigning incentives and decision pathways at high-risk chokepoints, backed by independent oversight and sustained capacity. Investing in integrity therefore is investing in trust, without which higher education cannot fulfil its public purpose.

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