

Corruption Is Ruining Cross-Border Education

By [Philip Altbach](#)

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A specter of corruption is haunting the global campaign toward higher education internationalization. An overseas degree is increasingly valuable, so it is not surprising that commercial ventures have found opportunities on the internationalization landscape. New private actors have entered the sector, with the sole goal of making money. Some of them are less than honorable. Some universities look at internationalization as a contribution to the bottom line in an era of financial cutbacks. The rapidly expanding private higher education sector globally is largely for-profit. In a few cases, such as Australia and increasingly Britain, national policies concerning higher education internationalization tilt toward earning income for the system.

Countries whose academic systems suffer from elements of corruption are increasingly involved in international higher education — sending large numbers of students abroad and establishing relationships with overseas universities. Corruption is not limited to countries that may have a reputation for less than fully circumspect academic practices, but

that problem occurs globally.

Several scandals have recently been widely reported in the United States, including the private unaccredited Tri-Valley University, a sham institution that admitted and collected tuition from foreign students. That institution did not require them to attend class, but rather funneled them into the labor market, under the noses of U.S. immigration authorities. In addition, several public universities have been caught admitting students with substandard academic qualifications. Quality-assurance agencies in Britain have uncovered problems with "franchised" British-degree programs, and similar scandals have occurred in Australia. A prominent example is the University of Wales, which was the second-largest university in Britain, with 70,000 students enrolled in 130 colleges around the world. It had to close its highly profitable degree validation program, which accounted for nearly two-thirds of institutional revenue.

International higher education is now a multibillion-dollar global industry. With individuals, countries and institutions depending on income, prestige and access, it is not surprising that corruption is a growing problem. If something is not done to ensure probity in international relationships in higher education, an entire structure built on trust — a commitment built informally over decades — will collapse. There are signs that it is already in deep trouble.

Altered and fake documents have long been a problem in international admissions. Computer design and technology exacerbate it. Fraudulent documents have become a minor industry in some parts of the world, and many universities are reluctant to accept documents from institutions that have been tainted with incidents of counterfeit records. For example, a number of U.S. universities no longer accept applications from some Russian students because of widespread perceptions of document tampering and other falsifications. Document fraud gained momentum due to commission-based agents who have an incentive to ensure that students are "packaged" with impressive credentials, since their commissions depend on successful student placement. Those responsible for checking the accuracy of transcripts, recommendations and degree certificates face an increasingly difficult task. Students who submit valid documentation are placed at a disadvantage since they are subjected to extra scrutiny.

Instances of tampering with and falsification of results of the Graduate Record Examination and other required international examinations used for admissions have resulted in the nullification of scores. This situation has made it more difficult for students to apply to foreign universities and has made the task of evaluating students for admission more difficult.

Several countries, including Russia and India, have announced that they will use the Times Higher Education and Academic Ranking of World Universities to determine the legitimacy of foreign universities for recognizing foreign degrees, determining eligibility for academic collaborations and other aspects of international higher education relations. This is unfortunate, since many excellent academic institutions are not included in these rankings, which mostly measure research productivity. No doubt Russia and India are concerned about the quality of foreign partners and find the rankings convenient.

Several host countries have tightened up rules and oversight of cross-border student flows

in response to irregularities and corruption. Earlier, both Australia and Britain changed rules and policy. Corruption is making internationalization more difficult for the entire higher education sector. It is perhaps significant that continental Europe seems to have been less affected by shady practices — perhaps in part because international higher education is less commercialized and profit-driven.

The Internet has become the Wild West of academic chicanery. It is easy to set up an impressive website and grossly misrepresent or basically invent an institution. Some institutions claim accreditation that does not exist. There are even "accreditation mills" to accredit universities that pay a fee. A few include pictures of impressive campuses that are simply Photoshopped from other universities.

With international higher education now big business and with commercial gain an increasing motivation for international initiatives, the problems mentioned are likely to persist. But a range of initiatives can ameliorate the situation. The higher education community can recommit to the traditional "public good" values of internationalization, although current funding challenges may make this difficult in some countries. A recent report from the International Association of Universities titled "Affirming Academic Values in Internationalization of Higher Education" is a good start. The essential values of the European Union's Bologna Initiatives are also consistent with the best values of internationalization.

Accreditation and quality assurance are essential for ensuring that basic quality is recognized. Agencies and the international higher education community must ensure that universities are carefully evaluated and that the results of assessment are easily available to the public and the international stakeholders.

Consciousness-raising about ethics and good practice in international higher education and awareness of emerging problems and continuing challenges deserve continuing attention. Prospective students and their families, institutional partners considering exchanges and other stakeholders must be more sophisticated and vigilant concerning decisionmaking. Boston College's Center for International Higher Education's Corruption Monitor is the only clearinghouse for information relating directly to corrupt practices. Additional sources of information and analysis would be helpful.

The first step in solving a major challenge to higher education internationalization is recognition of the problem itself. The higher education community itself is by no means united, and growing commercialization makes some people reluctant to act in ways that may threaten profits. There are individuals within the academic community who lobby aggressively to legitimize dubious practices. Yet if nothing is done, the higher education sector worldwide will suffer, and the impressive strides taken toward internationalization will be threatened.

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