

## **Bringing integrity back in the academia**

### **Background paper**

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What do the dismissal of LSE management over the dissertation by a Gaddafi son, the resignation of a German minister over a plagiarism scandal, the crackdown by the Chinese government on dishonest universities and the many East European websites selling custom-written dissertations (not to mention diplomas) have in common? They all prove the emergence of a global market for just the certification of knowledge, alongside and subversive of the global market for knowledge.

The market for knowledge is based on a demand for skills and the rest of substantive content associated with education and research, proven by top qualifications. The other market only caters to the demand for the accreditation, certification and recognition of the above – and that is all. Skills are dispensable because the son of a dictator will inherit the country in any event, top politicians will succeed in obtaining office on other grounds than their education (but it adds a note of seriousness if they bring their PhDs along with them) and in systemically corrupt countries patrons will provide jobs for their clients, not labor markets. Due to increasing demands for at least formal merit based competitions, clients need, however, some, formal qualification: a diploma of some sort. The existing demand is met by entrepreneurs who range from the liberal Western professor who sees no reason to not grant a degree to a politician who is aware that a ghostwriter will write the dissertation, to the bright East European student who helps colleagues with their own papers and sees no harm in making a systematic profit out of it. As scholars of governance, we find indeed evidence from many countries that people rank education far below connections as the key to a successful life<sup>1</sup>.

In the past few decades, the great promotion of education as the short-cut to success seems to have been based on the presumption that educational merit is the basis of success in every field and in every society, although the daily experience of many people invalidates this dictum. Such experiences are limited in developed countries (for example, public universities are underfinanced and raise money from dictators to fund their research) and widespread in less developed ones (where jobs in the public sector, including education, are distributed on the basis of affiliation to the 'right' clan, party, tribe or individual with superior power capital, not merit proven in some open competition).

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<sup>1</sup> See survey results in Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, 'Understanding Balkan Particularism. The Ambiguous Social Capital of South-eastern Europe', *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* Vol. 5, No. 1, January 2005, Taylor & Francis, London, pp. 45–65

Moreover, the recent global demand for increased competitiveness of educational units and individuals had the unintended consequence of stimulating behavior meant to meet only the formal criteria of knowledge, ranging from manipulation to sheer fraud. Coping with the increased demand for top education explains in part the recent increase in plagiarism, falsification and fraud, which has reached new heights<sup>2</sup>. Examiners at the most sought after universities are faced with hard guesses when reading the grades of applicants from many new universities around the world and trying to figure out the substance behind. Europe is not always better than the rest of the world. According to a 2012 Eurobarometer, a third of the population in Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria believes that people working in the public education sector are corrupt themselves<sup>3</sup>.

According to the 2012 World Bank report<sup>4</sup>, almost all countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia have serious integrity in higher education issues and 60% of the respondents in their survey 'reported knowing of other students who had purchased either entrance at the university or a specific grade'. In 2009, the hugely publicized case of diploma fraud at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czech Republic brought the integrity discussion back to the public agenda. As a result, all universities were audited at the order of the Ministry of Education. In Georgia, in 2005, 100 out of the 178 higher education institutions were barred to organize new admissions, following the accreditation assessment in 2004. Most of these institutions were private providers.

In Romania, a grassroots level type of approach was taken in 2007 by a group of 14 nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) which combined forces to form the Coalition for Clean Universities (CUC)<sup>5</sup> aimed at monitoring the integrity of Romanian university and establishing rules of good governance. Teams of evaluators composed of experts and students were sent on-site to universities, following initial requests for information related to a number of relevant areas based on the Romanian Law for Access to Public Information. The findings of the project uncovered evidence of increased tolerance for plagiarism (which only became heavily publicly disputed after a series of scandals involving top level Romanian politicians in 2012, evidence of extended nepotism and lack of transparency in decision making within the academic process.

Economists have very few ideas on how to solve governance problems such as this. Their classic diagnosis terms this a principal agent problem. But it is unclear, especially in highly corrupt societies, which government principal can initiate a policy to control and punish the unruly agents, since the principal more often than not runs the corrupt show himself. Perhaps those who are honest and with a high degree of integrity can serve as principals of

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson, "[Academic fraud, accreditation and quality assurance: learning from the past and challenges for the future](#)". In: *Higher education in the world 2007. Accreditation for quality assurance: what is at stake?* Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI), 2006.

<sup>3</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_374\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_374_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Lars Sondergaard et al., 'Skills, not just diplomas. Managing Education for Results in Eastern Europe and Central Asia', Chapter 5, World Bank, 2012: [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/ECAEXT/Resources/101411\\_FullReport.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/ECAEXT/Resources/101411_FullReport.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina and A. Dusu, 'Civil Society and Control of Corruption: Assessing Governance of Romanian Public Universities' (March 18, 2011). *International Journal of Educational Development*, March 2011. Available at SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1790062>

a pro-integrity policy, even if they are not in top positions. This, however, is also difficult: We have a significant association between systemic corruption and braindrain. The best educated flee from societies where merit is not rewarded, leaving behind an even more difficult problem of engineering collective action on behalf of integrity.

What is then the solution to a full-fledged subversive market of this type? If incentives for integrity are difficult to create, at least some incentives for cheating could be obliterated through an acknowledgement of the problem in the pan-European level policy initiatives.

A possible step forward could be that the next Ministerial Communiqué of the Bologna Process in 2015 includes a clear reference to integrity as a principle of the Bologna Process, in addition to stakeholder involvement, institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Furthermore, if we understand quality assurance in higher education as a means to ensure minimum standards, then it would seem natural that the revised version of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, to be adopted by the 47 Bologna Process ministers in 2015, should include a standard linked to academic integrity (with substantive, rather than formal indicators) which could be added to all national and institutional quality assurance systems. Quality assurance is still an area in which progress is needed, especially if one looks at the participation of students, staff and international experts in internal and external reviews of universities and programmes<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, we believe that an organization such as the Council of Europe has some enforcement means as well and that momentum for peer pressure can be created, especially since its 2014-2015 draft Education Workplan already lists corruption of education as one of the main items the Council could make a value-added contribution to. A standard-setting text, such as a recommendation of the Council of Ministers or even a convention on this topic, would be very timely when regarding the manifest increase in the public's lack of trust in higher education credentials.

The World Bank<sup>7</sup> also proposed a series of tools for strengthening basic academic and fiscal integrity in university-level institutions (see table below):

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission: 'The European Higher Education Area in 2012: The Bologna Process Implementation Report' (2012): [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/\(1\)/Bologna%20Process%20Implementation%20Report.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/(1)/Bologna%20Process%20Implementation%20Report.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Lars Sondergaard et al., 'Skills, not just diplomas. Managing Education for Results in Eastern Europe and Central Asia', Chapter 5, page154, World Bank, 2012

**Table 5.1 Tools for Strengthening Basic Academic and Fiscal Integrity in University-Level Institutions**

<i>Tools that strengthen academic integrity</i>	<i>Tools that strengthen fiscal integrity</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Licensing ... and educational quality</li> <li>• Accreditation, academic audits, and evaluations</li> <li>• Public disclosure laws</li> <li>• Fostering of outsiders to review academic integrity (e.g., Romania)</li> <li>• Performance contracts based on performance indicators</li> <li>• Creation and dissemination of rankings, benchmarks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial audits ... and fiscal efficiency</li> <li>• Public disclosure laws</li> <li>• Strategic budget plans</li> <li>• Performance contracts based on performance indicators</li> <li>• Student loans, scholarships, and vouchers</li> <li>• Embedding of incentives into allocated resources (e.g., tying funding to the number of students enrolled or graduated, rewarding good performers, etc.)</li> </ul>

Sources: Authors' review of available instruments, as presented in Salmi 2009.

In the authors' view, among the institutional tools which should also be promoted by peer pressure are the facilitation of public access to information, the absolute transparency in criteria for academic competitions and accreditations, the mandatory introduction of strong conflict of interest rules, and the independent monitoring of early awareness indicators known as red flags to alert of systemic distortion of merit as the basis for evaluation. It is only right that a phenomenon which was stimulated by the global demand for degrees' recognition is also helped by global demand in finding a cure.

We do not expect that a few new international rules will by themselves change much, but we aim to create institutional weapons for those domestic entrepreneurs of integrity willing to build coalitions against systematic imposture. The rest is collective action, where capacity varies greatly across countries and academic communities.

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