TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL
the global coalition against corruption
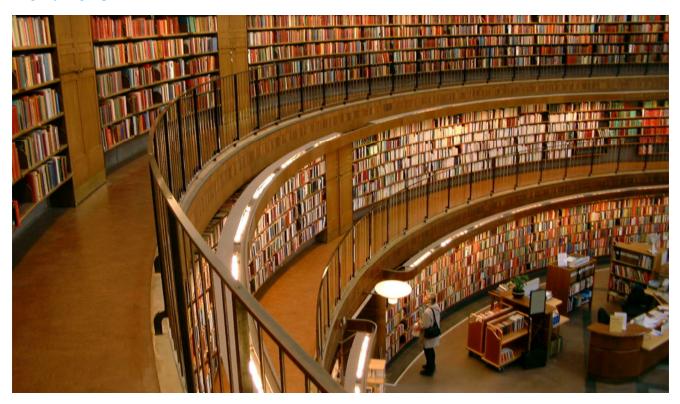
PREVENTING UNDUE INFLUENCE AND PRESERVING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Universities are important settings in which young people develop values and where knowledge is promoted and advanced. Universities can best fulfil this role if they are autonomous, independent and free of external influence. However, the question of their funding has recently threatened to undermine the academic integrity of universities.

Higher education has changed enormously over the past decades, as has its funding.[1]

Firstly, higher education is no longer reserved for the elite and is in great demand, with enrolment rising fivefold since 1970.[2] In many industrialised countries, enrolment rates stand at over 60 per cent; in middle-income and low-income countries the proportion is approaching 30 and 15 per cent, respectively (the latter being the transition point to a mass higher education system).

At the same time, the supply of public resources has not kept pace with this increased demand. For universities, this has meant heightened competition for resources, placing increasing pressure to seek and secure funding and show good academic results. Yet universities have not put in place adequate controls and oversight, such as due diligence and conflict of interest policies, to address the increased risks posed to their integrity and independence.

Nowhere is this clearer than for university research and the monies that fund it. Risks to higher academic research can come when the government or private sector exerts undue influence on their research agendas. This undue influence may lead to broader academic dishonesty – plagiarism, fraud and manipulation of results – that undermine academic integrity. When checks-and-balances, strong management leadership and a culture of academic honesty are missing, breaches of academic integrity among staff and students may go undetected or unpunished. If universities do not address these risks and take steps to rectify them, the whole system of higher education can be undermined.

THE ISSUE

Funding pressures for universities have created a set of risk factors regardless of whether money is coming from companies, governments or private contributors. It is the responsibility of universities to foster academic honesty, openness, accountability and integrity among all students and research staff that helps to prevent funding pressures from compromising a climate of integrity.

Corporate funding

Since the 1980s there has been a rapid increase in the corporate funding of university research. Across universities in industrialised countries, the share of government-funded academic research decreased on average by 10 per cent between 1981 and 2003, while the proportion of business sector financing doubled.[3] Industry-university collaborations can offer mutual benefits, but the danger arises when businesses fund research to lend academic credibility to support their commercial interests at the expense of independent research. In some cases, industry-academic ties have been associated with delays in the publication of research results and the withholding of data.

Government funding

Public funds make up a substantial part of university budgets and universities are increasingly in competition to receive them. Similar to corporate funding, the danger arises when governments fund research to favour a certain political agenda.

Private funding

Funding from individuals can raise ethical questions when funds from questionable sources are not adequately vetted. Universities must consider the wider implications of accepting donations or engaging in commercial services with individuals whose money may originate from illicit sources. Moreover, when vetting mechanisms exist, universities need to give due attention to 'red flags'.

RECOMMENDATIONS
TO UNIVERSITIES:

Disclose all relevant university information in a timely manner

- Make available in a timely manner, ideally on a university's website, all relevant information, particularly about budgets and funding arrangements.

- Put in place guidelines to allow students and other stakeholders to monitor the transparency of funding and an institution. For example, governance rankings of schools can help to promote greater transparency (see side bar, next page).

Implement policies to promote academic honesty, integrity and ethics

- Establish a code of ethics and a conflict of interest policy for all university staff, including for research agreements.

- Put in place a clear code of conduct and rules for reporting academic fraud for students and staff.

- Provide protections for whistleblowers and other individuals alleging misconduct and ensure that an independent body reviews their concerns.

THE UK, ACADEMIA AND INDEPENDENCE

The UK has a long history of academic independence but this has allegedly come under question recently.

In 1918, the "Haldane principle" set out that all government-funded research would be free from political influence.

The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) delivery plan, published in December 2010, noted that some of its funding would go to a research programme that would 'contribute to the government's initiatives on localism and the "Big Society".'

The opposition and media responded strongly. Academics felt it was a roll-back of the Haldane principle. More than 4,000 academics, including many respected and well-known figures, signed petitions calling on the AHRC to remove the "Big Society" from its delivery plan. When this did not happen, 52 members of the AHRC Peer Review College resigned en masse.

GAPS IN DUE DILIGENCE: THE ABUBAKAR AFFAIR

In 2010, the US Senate investigated the relationship between American University in Washington, DC, and a former Nigerian vice president Atiku Abubakar and his wife, a US citizen. Apart from allegedly laundering US$ 40 million through US bank accounts, the report found that the university had accepted around US$ 14 million in consulting fees from the couple to start a university in Nigeria without ever doing due diligence into the origin of the money (a step which is not required under US law).

This was not the first time such allegations were made against Abubakar and his wife. In a separate investigation in 2008 by the US Securities and Exchange Commission, the vice president's wife allegedly received about US$ 2 million in bribes from Siemens AG, the German industrial giant. The couple, living outside the US, has never been prosecuted.

- Create a clear and up-to-date due diligence policy that is used in practice to vet funding sources.

Promote ethical practices and training among students and staff

- Establish simple measures by all departments to detect plagiarism (such as library plagiarism checks of new dissertations, plagiarism-detection software and courses on plagiarism).

- Prioritise new methods to teach ethics that connect with students and prepare them to act with integrity in school and in their future careers.

- Provide courses on academic integrity (in particular, on academic fraud) for students and staff to create a common understanding of what a breach of academic integrity entails and how to avoid it.

Establish preventative steps to protect academic integrity

- Protect research autonomy by inserting "freedom-to-publish" clauses in all research funding agreements.

- Apply peer review mechanisms for all research products.

- Take action when red flags of corruption or misconduct do appear, whether in funding agreements or in research products.

ABOUT THE SERIES

This policy brief is one of five that has been produced using information presented in Transparency International's *Global Corruption Report: Education* . The report presents more than 70 articles written by experts in the fields of corruption and education, from universities, think tanks, business, civil society and international organisations. The report presents both qualitative and quantitative research to advance our understanding of the dynamics of corruption in the sector and focuses on providing examples of practical solutions. The report is published by Earthscan from Routledge. For more information, see:
www.transparency.org/research/gcr

RANKING TRANSPARENT SCHOOLS IN ROMANIA

Higher education in Romania is readily accessible but the quality of what one learns has become a concern. Not one Romanian university can be found among the listings of top international schools and graduates from the country's schools often lack the training and skills needed to compete in the labour market.

In response to these worries, the Romanian Academic Society, an education think tank, launched in 2007 an initiative called the Coalition for Clean Universities (CCU). The coalition has brought together students, teachers, professional associations and education journalists to benchmark, assess and promote the integrity of the country's public higher education system. The coalition has published a ranking of universities based on their transparency and integrity. Coalition members feel the index is doubly useful: it has put in the spotlight good and bad practices on part of local universities that will hopefully trigger needed reforms.

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NOTES

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all content, facts and figures are drawn from the following chapters of Transparency International's *Global Corruption Report: Education* (Oxon: Earthscan from Routledge, 2013): Arvind Ganesan, 'University funds: giving due diligence due significance'; Romanian Academic Society, 'Ranking university governance in Romania: an exportable model?'; Stephen Heyneman, 'Higher education institutions: why they matter and why corruption puts them at risk'; David Robinson, 'Corrupting research integrity: corporate funding and academic independence'; and Melissa Anderson and Takehito Kamata, 'Scientific research integrity as a matter of transparency'.
[2] UNESCO Institute for Statistics, *Comparing Education Statistics across the World*, Global Education Digest 2010 (Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2010), pp. 12, 162.