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Impacts of globalisation on the academic profession

Emerging corruption risks in higher education

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In recent decades universities around the world have become the focus of intense political interest as drivers of global and national economies. The mission of the modern university was historically defined as social and cultural as well as economic. The balance of priorities has been undergoing a major shift, however, as higher education is increasingly being recognised as a driver of the new 'knowledge economy'.² In an environment in which higher education is treated as an aspect of economic policy, universities are coming under increasing pressure from governments and transnational institutions to become more entrepreneurial and responsive to the market.³

This new order of academic work has been described as 'academic capitalism',⁴ and its demands often clash with the traditional structures and values of the university. Researchers and policy-makers are only beginning to understand how the clash of old and new in the academic workplace affects corruption risks. While evidence of corruption is difficult to collect, much is known about the structural factors that tend to increase its likelihood. Five key structural changes in twenty-first-century academia, outlined below, are known in social science research to be linked with dishonest and corrupt behaviour. These emerging corruption risks require further empirical study to understand how the changing structure of universities might affect the ethical behaviour of academics and university administrators.

Emerging corruption risks in universities

In all social realms, but particularly in science and higher education, ethical behaviour is regulated by collective norms. When these communal norms of behaviour are eroded, individuals' internal incentive mechanisms no longer reward good behaviour, and the risks of unethical behaviour rise.⁵ Even principled individuals may justify a breach of their own values when they see hostile or dishonest actions as widespread, claiming that they simply cannot

afford to be honest.⁶ In academia, the new pressures experienced by faculty are often contrary to the traditional values of the academic profession. The resulting ambiguity can easily lead to disillusionment and give licence to unethical behaviour.⁷

Excessive competition

In recent years, competition in academia has been on the rise.⁸ It is often assumed to play a positive role in stimulating excellence. Competition can be a double-edged sword, however. Numerous studies have shown that a competitive working climate increases the likelihood of unethical conduct.⁹ Competition for resources creates a kind of workplace that values individual achievement over collaborative work. When such a climate is present in academia, the pressure to perform sometimes drives faculty to cross the line into abusing their authority for private gain.

The emerging model of academic work as a profit-oriented activity has increased levels of competition among faculty in higher education.¹⁰ Academic scientists in particular perceive their fields as increasingly competitive, and often attribute bad behaviour to the associated pressures.¹¹

Competition can affect academics' perceptions of what is and is not ethical. In one study, for instance, junior researchers in different disciplines were asked to rate real-life scenarios with ethical implications. Those in the health sciences performed significantly worse than those in less competitive fields.¹² Another study of academics at the 100 most research-intensive universities in the United States found that self-reported unethical behaviour in the life sciences was more frequent in high-competition fields.¹³ These findings confirm that pressure to perform affects the likelihood of faculty engaging in unethical behaviour as a way of protecting their competitive edge. In light of these findings, university administrators and professional associations must not assume that all competition produces desirable results when striving to stimulate the competitiveness of researchers.

Misalignment of teaching and research

In the last two decades research has gained precedence over teaching in many academic working environments.¹⁴ In many cases, however, faculty do not have the space both to generate new knowledge and to dedicate time to teaching, and they often cannot realistically meet all expectations.¹⁵ Conflicting demands increase the likelihood that hard-pressed individuals might abuse their authority to escape a double bind of having to fail some expectations in order to satisfy others.

For example, during the implementation of the Bologna Process¹⁶ in Ukraine, faculty were told to increase their research output without any simultaneous change to their heavy instructional workloads or salaries. Some admitted that they responded to the conflicting demands by producing bogus or worthless research.¹⁷ Other reports suggest that many others resort to corruption, such as demanding bribes from students, or offering unnecessary but lucrative private tutoring.¹⁸

Although research has always been an essential component of faculty work, its importance has shifted in significant ways in the last few decades. The emergence of international rankings and the idea of a research-intensive 'world-class university' elevated research productivity to top priority,¹⁹ and the work of academic staff is being reshaped by an unprecedented emphasis on performance evaluation.²⁰ Pressure for more research of higher quality becomes a fertile ground for corruption, however, if it is not accompanied by a concurrent adjustment of the working arrangements for academic staff. As European and African institutions historically tasked with student instruction now experience greater pressure

from governments to produce more research, demands on faculty must be adjusted to reflect current priorities. Ironically, more research is needed on how pressure for research is reshaping the daily work of faculty, especially those in developing countries, and to what extent it creates tensions between ethical values and the realities of professional survival.

Disproportionate rewards

With research as the top priority for many academic institutions, the stakes of publishing in high-impact journals for individual researchers run higher than ever. Evidence indicates that the disproportionate rewards of such publications may create incentives for dishonesty. For instance, journals with higher impact factors have been found to have significantly higher rates of retraction for the specific reason of fraud.²¹ Researchers point to the high rewards associated with publishing in high-impact journals as drivers of such misconduct.²²

Disproportionate rewards for high-impact publication result from a wider trend in higher education towards external rewards for performance. Recognising the critical role of higher education in national development, governments and funding agencies reward academics and institutions that deliver measurable results. Extrinsic rewards are known to have the potential to diminish intrinsic motivation, however,²³ which is in turn associated with greater levels of prosocial attitudes.²⁴ An unbalanced use of rewards based on external performance may undermine the motivational forces that drive academics to serve the public good rather than private interest. For example, academics at some public institutions in Ukraine are required to submit proof of having published a number of articles each year in order to have their annual contract extended. This practice encourages short-term projects and can cause some academic researchers to produce low-quality research with little benefit to society.²⁵

In recent decades the rewards of dishonesty in academic research have been made greater by the rapid growth of the higher education sector and an oversupply of academics competing for limited resources. In many fields, only a small number of doctoral graduates are able to gain secure academic positions and conduct independent research. The pyramid rules of contemporary science resemble those of a tournament – ‘amplifying small differences in productivity into large differences in recognition and reward’.²⁶ Such disproportionate and perverse incentives have been linked to practices that include interference in the peer review process, sabotaging the work of colleagues and engaging in questionable research conduct.²⁷

Given the ethical risks associated with disproportionate reliance on extrinsic motivations, policy-makers and research administrators should recognise and cultivate intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivations for academic faculty. A balanced approach would capitalise on the proven productivity rewards of intrinsic motivation²⁸ and avoid the hypocritical trap of demanding integrity while rewarding outcomes at all cost.

Injustice in working environments

Ethical conduct is also known to be associated with perceptions of procedural justice: fairness in the processes for deciding who gets what resources. When people perceive these processes as unfair, they are more likely to compensate by engaging in unethical behaviours.²⁹

In the United States, perceptions of unfairness in the academic workplace have risen in recent decades with the growing reliance on adjunct and non-tenure-track appointments. Faculty on fixed-term contracts face significant pay inequities, little if any job security and fewer advancement opportunities than their tenure-track colleagues.³⁰ They make from

22 per cent to 40 per cent less than tenure-track staff,³¹ and are often seen as a second-class teaching force. Reports suggest that they can lose their jobs for reasons such as sexual orientation,³² unpopular political opinions³³ or by irritating students.³⁴

Unfair treatment of those in a vulnerable employment position creates a fertile ground for abuses of authority, especially when adjunct faculty do not receive sufficient mentoring. The incidence of corruption across different academic ranks has not yet been the subject of sufficient empirical study, but it is known that responses to perceived injustice are mediated by social identity, or the standing of individuals in their social environment. Unfair treatment is more likely to prompt unethical behaviour in those who do not feel secure in their position and have reason to fear that it may be undermined, as is known to be the case with adjunct faculty.³⁵ The limited research that is currently available should also prompt administrators and policy-makers to have serious cause for concern. Studies conducted by University of Minnesota professor Melissa Anderson and colleagues confirm that perceptions of injustice are positively correlated with self-reported misbehaviour in academia. Their study of biomedical faculty, for instance, found that perceptions of unfairness are more strongly linked to misbehaviour for less well-established researchers³⁶ – those whose position in the academic workplace is more vulnerable.

Government and university administrators concerned with preventing misbehaviour in academia should invest in the fair remuneration and mentoring of part-time faculty. Such investment begins with the recognition of their significant and permanent role. Adjunct appointments in the United States rose from 22 per cent of the workforce in 1970³⁷ to 47 per cent in 2010.³⁸ When almost three-quarters of undergraduate instructors are now employed in limited-term contracts, their training and mentoring are crucial for maintaining not only the integrity of the academic profession but also the quality of university education.

Concentration of power with insufficient checks and balances

In the past two decades there has been a rapid transition in the distribution of power in higher education systems around the globe. It has led to concentrations of authority that resist constructive checks and balances, creating opportunities for corruption.

As universities are subjected to increasing pressure to fuel the growth of the 'knowledge economy', traditions of shared faculty governance are being challenged in response to demands for increased efficiency and responsiveness to the market.³⁹ For example, many European countries, such as Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, have seen a concentration of executive power in the hands of a managerial team at the expense of traditional faculty bodies. Multiple reforms in the past two decades, both in Europe and in the United States, were based on the assumption that universities can better serve the needs of the economy if more competencies are placed in the hands of administrators.⁴⁰ The shift raised concerns about the excessive power of administrators and the marginalisation of faculty.⁴¹

A recent rash of embezzlement cases involving senior administrators in the United States has exposed the possibility that some of the new arrangements place insufficient checks and balances on powerful university executives.⁴² For example, the former president of Kansas City University of Medicine and Biosciences was recently indicted in a large embezzlement case. Over a period of many years she had produced fake minutes from committee meetings at which the only item of business was to award her payments of US\$65,000. The lack of checks and balances on the president cost the university US\$1.5 million in unauthorised compensation and fraudulent reimbursements.⁴³

In other countries, such as Poland and the Czech Republic, the trend to concentrate power in the hands of managers achieved the opposite effect to what happened in



Excessive competition



Misalignment of teaching and research



Disproportionate rewards



Injustice in working environments



Insufficient checks and balances

Figure 3.6 Drivers of corruption in higher education

may take the form of embezzlement, the improper allocation of funds, failure to follow due process, and others.⁴⁶ These risks must be mediated with a separation of the legislative, executive and supervisory functions in the governance of universities. While difficult politically, a strategic separation of powers is likely to boost not only the integrity of the academic workplace but also its own well-being and productivity.

Conclusion

Funding and governance policies that follow the model of a market-responsive university are reshaping the daily work of the faculty and administrators charged with realising the mission of higher education. While generating new values, ‘academic capitalism’ also creates new corruption risks that need to be recognised and dealt with by academic and government leaders.

The good news is that, despite the new pressures, the majority of academics still strongly subscribe to the norms of their profession. It is troubling, however, that they increasingly perceive the ethic of their workplaces as being inconsistent with their own beliefs.⁴⁷ The integrity of the academic workplace depends on a continued belief in common norms. If faculty see those around them engaging in counter-normative behaviour and profiting without censure, the ethos that has conserved academic integrity runs the risk of disintegrating. Ambiguous norms around the proper exercise of authority in higher education are bound to cast a long shadow over the professions for which students are being prepared. Higher education leaders in both government and academia must work to prevent this scenario if corruption in higher education is to remain the exception rather than an unstated rule.

Denmark and the Netherlands. European pressures for more administrative power provoked strong resistance that entrenched the power of faculty bodies and stalled institutional accountability.⁴⁴ In Poland, for instance, faculty impeded reforms to an existing governance structure in which the university senate combines legislative, administrative and supervisory competencies.⁴⁵ Reform did not proceed despite general agreement that combining the functions of employee representation and management is a recipe for the abuse of authority for the benefit of individuals and narrow interest groups.

Whether power lies in the hands of administrators or faculty, its excessive concentration without sufficient accountability carries increased risks of corruption. These

Notes

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