SESRI Policy Brief

Public Opinion on Academic Fraud and Higher Education Certificate Forgeries

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A post university degree has steadily become a prerequisite for an increasing number of occupations. This puts more responsibility on higher education institutions, while simultaneously creating a gap that allows for corrupt practices that hinder education sustainability. This brief is based on information collected from a survey of Qatari nationals and expatriates on factors affecting educational sustainability such as academic fraud and the counterfeiting of higher education certificates. The aim is to understand public opinions on fraudulent academic behavior, difficulties in detecting forgeries and the severity of punishment, and to provide strategies that may enhance compliance with educational regulations. The study is part of SESRI's Qatar Semi-Annual Survey (QSAS), which provides valuable data for decision makers, politicians, and scholars in the field. The insights drawn from this study are a fundamental precondition for improving and sustaining education policies as part of the country's 2030 vision.

Qatar's National Vision 2030 aims to transform the country from a rentier economy to a knowledge-based economy. This led to large investments in the education sector, most notably in projects and institutions such as Qatar Foundation's Education City, the Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF), Qatar University (QU), and the Qatar Science and Technology Park (QSTP). The nation also witnessed investments and improvements in other fields such as infrastructure and health, increasing the need for qualified individuals to work in these sectors. The growing number of knowledge-based jobs in the country has thus opened a gap that allows for corrupt practices, especially in the absence of cautious checks and regulations.

Academic fraud is defined as any type of cheating that occurs in relation to a formal academic exercise[1]. Such practices pose a significant challenge for higher educational institutions around the world. Examples of academic fraud include plagiarism, false citations, false data/fabrication, deception, cheating, bribery, sabotage, and impersonation[2]. However, this study focuses specifically on the forging of higher education certificates. Failing to combat this issue will delay the region's ambitious aim to move away from rentier economies.

In the 2022 Qatar Semi-Annual Survey (QSAS) conducted by SESRI, a survey was administered to understand the level of awareness and the perceived factors that influence an individual's likelihood of engaging in academic fraud. Both Qataris and higher income expatriates were included in the survey. Since the phenomenon is a global issue, and the work force in Qatar is dominated by non-Qatari individuals, it was necessary to include the views of both respondents. The ultimate objective was to recommend strategies that best target fraudulent academic activities.

Awareness of Academic Fraud

The phenomenon of fraudulent higher academic degrees is one of the most dangerous social issues influencing generations of students around the world. Its effects are transnational, affecting both the country where the practice happens and the one where the fraudulent degree holder chooses to work. Such corruption increases transaction costs, reduces the efficiency and quality of services, disrupts the decision-making process, and undermines social values.
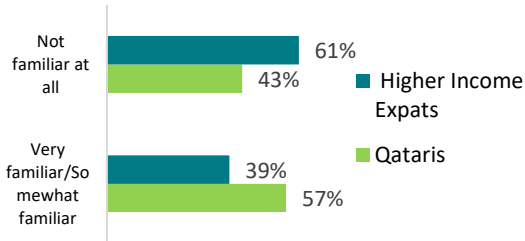
Figure. 1. Familiarity with Academic Fraud by Citizenship

Within the population of Qatar, 50% of locals were aware of academic fraud, compared to 39% of higher income expatriates. Awareness of fraudulent activities is the first and most essential step in combating it. It certainly is easier to halt the activity rather than aim to undo its impact once it has already been conducted. Hence, all individuals within institutions should be aware of potential fraudulent activities[3].

Motivations to Engage in Academic Fraud

The incentives to engage in academic fraud are strong. The payoff is relatively high compared to the cost and perceived risk. Moreover, as educational attainment is associated with occupational and economic status, individuals often seek to enhance their status by obtaining degrees[4]. Human capital and labor economic theories explain that individuals may opt for fake degrees to maximize earnings in the longrun[5]. For instance, if an employee cannot be promoted due to a lack of post college/university degree, he or she may act irrationally and purchase a fake degree to maximize earnings and improve his or her occupational status.

Hindrances Affecting Fraud Detection

Even countries that have well-developed accreditation guidelines with clear standards for educational quality are vulnerable to challenges related to academic and degree fraud. Since a large number of university

graduates pursue their post-university education abroad, this has made it difficult for authorities to track and cease forgeries.
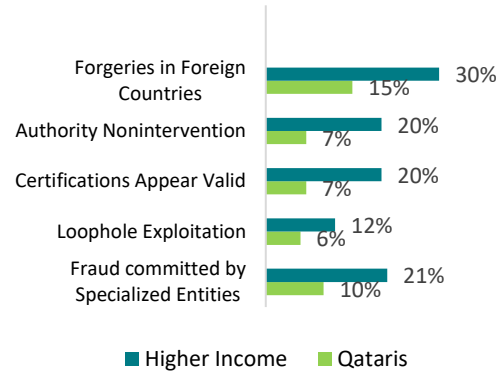

Figure. 2. Hindrances Affecting Academic Fraud Detection

Figure 2 highlights the perceived obstacles that hinder the ability to deter academic fraud. The majority of respondents believe that academic fraud was difficult to detect, given that most forgeries occur in foreign countries. They also agreed that exploiting loopholes is the least important obstacle to detecting academic fraud. Given that Qatar's laws for certificate attestation are standardized and detailed, these answers reflect the particular environment in Qatar. However, unfamiliarity with foreign institutions has been responsible for most of the certificate attestation problems.

Understanding the Forgers Detection Probability (FDP) is a necessary step in managing the forging behavior. With this tool, the detection of forging probability is determined by three main factors: law enforcement, forging rate, and evading activities[6]. The relationship between the above factors is shown in the equation below. Both the forging rate and enforcement are positively related to the probability of detection but negatively related to the increase in evading activities. Enforcement is a core factor that deters forging. Weak enforcement of regulations, inefficient institutions, and inadequate

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monitoring mechanisms encourage corruption and decrease forging detection.

$$FDP= f(E,V,F)$$

- Forging rates (F) are measured by the frequency of forging. If forging rates are high and practiced by many individuals, the probability of detecting forgeries increases and the reverse is correct if the forging rate is low.
- Evading practices (V) are the actions undertaken by forgers to avoid being detected (e.g., bribing, purchasing a degree, hiring others to write a thesis, etc.).
- Enforcement (E) represents the regulations imposed by academic institutions and organizations

Consequences of Academic Fraud

Academic Academic fraud hinders Qatar from achieving its vision of becoming a knowledge-based economy. Corruption in the form of academic forgeries distorts civic culture by distorting the reputation of integrity/fairness normally associated with an educational establishment and breeding a culture of cynicism about the nation and its claimed civic virtues. When the higher education is corrupt, young people come to believe that cheating and bribing are acceptable ways to advance their careers. Corruption undermines the incentives that motivate young people to work hard while teaching them that there are easier ways to achieve success. In essence, institutions that do not have strategies to deter academic fraud are often characterized by corruption. They weaken, rather than strengthen, a nation's social cohesion.

Strategies to Deter Academic Fraud

Academic fraud negatively impacts the social welfare. Masters and Ph.D. holders are supposed to represent the reliable elite in leading societies toward development, advancement, and growth in various fields. Therefore, forgeries that extend to the medical and engineering fields are the most concerning, given that they can affect the safety and livelihood of individuals[7].
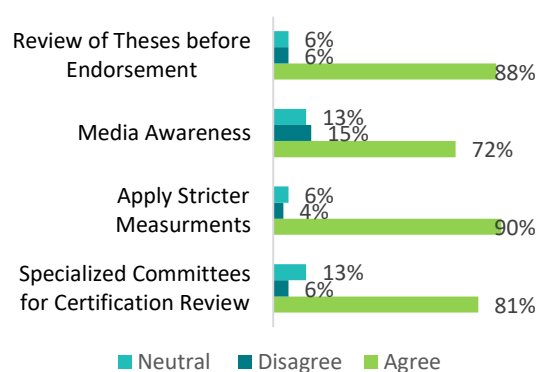

Figure. 3. Strategies to Combat Academic Fraud

Both respondent types (Qataris and higher income expatriates) agreed that stricter measure were the most important strategy to deter academic fraud. In contrast, media coverage was considered the least important. The increase in legal enforcement and measures is expected to decrease the number of academic fraud cases. It is important for higher education institutions to adopt and internalize a culture of evaluating higher-level certificates for administrators, faculty, and students. However, all four strategies were considered important to the respondents, given that over 70% of the respondents agreed with their significance. In

order to increase the productivity of a knowledge-based economy, it is imperative to eradicate forged and counterfeit certificates. Around 81% of respondents agreed that specialized committees are required for certification review. This parallels policies adopted across Europe, in which, the introduction of an independent university ranking system that includes academic integrity and financial probity as assessment criteria helped universities become more transparent and competitive by adopting better governance practices[8].

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Policy Recommendations

1. Enhance quality assurance of research sourced outside Qatar through the formation of independent regulatory bodies.

2. Re-evaluate the certification of degrees in the academic fields for those appointed before 2016 when new education roles were introduced.

3. Educate parents about the importance of academic integrity for educational sustainability.

4. Improve documentation and investigation standards by understanding the evading practices of violators so that they can be easily tracked and stopped.

5. Improve the procedures for evaluation, admission and protection of records by forming specialized committees to review the higher certificates.

6. Spread intellectual and moral values among young people and raise awareness about fraudulent and bribery behavior that undermines values and limits educational sustainability.