Quo Vadis higher education

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For years, doctors around the world have cheated while taking exams. A recent CNN investigation found doctors taking their board exams in radiology memorizing test questions, creating sophisticated banks of what are known as “recalls”.

Cheating at colleges and universities is nothing new. In 1964, a report of large-scale cheating involving 5,000 students studying in around 100 institutions was formally tabled. Fully 75% of the students were found guilty of various degrees of “academic dishonesty”. Recently, the Josephson Institute of Ethics in an appraisal of 40,000 high school students, found admittance of cheating in 60%. The Harvard University which prides itself on incubating America’s elite in the world of law, business and politics, revealed that 125 students taking a course were suspected of cheating on a single class.

In a survey of second year medical students of 31 medical schools across the United States of America, it was found that among the 62%-odd respondents, about 5% admitted to cheating during their first two years of medical school. Notably, these students appeared resigned to the fact that such things do occur and cannot be remedied.

Nearer home, a hi-tech mass copying racket in the entrance examination for the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, was busted by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The perpetrators included seven women medicos who cheated using sophisticated electronic gadgets hidden in their clothes, undergarments and hair were arrested along with seven other “experts” who orchestrated the process.

A new breed of ‘pushers’ are today found in the universities of Uzbekistan. These “specialists” have other steady jobs, but with the complicity of the National Security Service officials these pushers publicly enter the exam halls along with the students and help them for a sizable sum of money. “I can do the exam for three students at one go. I finish one set of answers for one student and give a signal and the next one brings his set to me. If anyone sees us we just haggle and give them some money” claimed one such pusher speaking anonymously to a BBC World Service reporter.

What is happening to higher education in the world we live in? Almost certainly, the above instances represent but the tip of an iceberg. Dishonesty, plagiarism and cheating today plague higher education. This is happening both in the developing and the developed world. What is the root cause for this malady? Here are a few possible reasons.

1. Poor compensation for the faculty in higher education.

In most parts of the world, especially in the developing world, the faculty in higher education is paid poorly. This makes them vulnerable to corrupt influences. In Uzbekistan for instance, they say that the process starts from nursery education and goes on up to the university levels.

2. Increasing levels of competition in institutions of higher learning.

More and more youngsters are opting for higher education and many are competing for fewer places.

3. Availability of hi-tech gadgets.

Cheating methods have evolved from “crib notes” written in microscopic handwriting upon bits of paper or upon the candidate’s own skin—to advanced gadgetry that can be concealed about the candidate’s person. Blue tooth enabled cell phones and micro sized earphones with fine near-invisible antennae
are now available and are nigh-impossible to
detect. Dedicated cliques now provide back-
ground support, with large sums of money ex-
changing hands.

4. Poor motivation of the students.

Higher education is a highly expensive propo-
sition. Private Public Participation models of
higher education are now available in the de-
velling world, operating on the principle of
self-financing. Students need to pay more for
their education, and the increasing commer-
cialization is making education inaccessible to
those of lower economic strata. On the other
hand, those who can afford to study in such in-
sstitutions are increasingly getting into them just
because they can; it is another matter that
many of them do not possess the requisite in-
clination, motivation and aptitude.

It is generally supposed that only a minority of
students within a group are involved in cheat-
ing. However, it can later come to pass that
other students, otherwise less inclined to cheat, would subsequently do so in order to
negate the advantage cheating students would
hold over them. McCabe and Treviño pub-
lished a survey they had conducted in more
than 6,000 students at 31 academic institu-
tions. They concluded that: “…the strong in-
fluence of peers’ behavior may suggest that aca-
demic dishonesty not only is learned from ob-
serving the behavior of peers, but that peers’
behavior provides a kind of normative support
for cheating. The fact that others are cheating
may also suggest that, in such a climate, the
non-cheater feels left at a disadvantage. Thus
cheating may come to be viewed as an ac-
ceptable way of getting and staying ahead.”

5. Covert support from the institution.

Institutions have as much pressure upon them
to maintain their standards of excellence (read
pass percentages) and this frequently involves
turning a blind eye to instances of academic
dishonesty. A “good” academic result helps
them to recruit more students and this helps
these institutions to thrive. Many institutions
are guilty of framing of examination questions
from specific question banks (the sources of
these questions are of course, a poorly
protected secret), and of deliberately over-
marking students in internal assessments in
order to improve their grades (rather than
standards). Students are impressionable; they
are also quick to recognize hypocrisy and to
 take advantage of the situation.

Many institutions do not conduct adequate ap-
titude tests for students at entry points. Due to
this, students enter these institutions some-
times just because they can pay, with only cur-
sory exams to filter them.

What has been done about this till now?

The first thing of course is to draw a line defining
what constitutes cheating. Cheating can range
from mild degrees of “patch-working” of extant lit-

terature to patent plagiaristic dishonesty. The defini-
tion can be colored by the regional culture and by
prevailing societal moral standards. The general
erosion of integrity has seen a generation brought
up subsisting on a diet of instant gratification, with
the notion that “minor” transgressions are ubiquit-
ous and therefore entirely acceptable.

The failure of teaching methods to keep pace with
burgeoning knowledge is also to an extent contri-
butory. There is still far more stress on memoriza-
tion rather than upon a firm understanding of un-
derlying concepts, with a persistent failure to ad-
dress the comprehension of these concepts through
frank interactive discussions and spot as-
sessments. Great pretences at stem
the rot are made regularly. There is a lot to be said
about a frank acknowledgement of the problems at
hand. “There’s somewhat of a tendency to handle
everything quietly and privately because it’s not
something you want to brag about,” says John
Fremer, president of Caveon, a Utah-based testing
security company. “It’s not so much that you want
to catch cheaters. You want to stop cheating.”

It is a fact that models within medical education
programs are still based largely on trust. The com-
ponent of trust, though, is fast eroding and needs
 to be restored and preserved. In a profession in
which human lives are at stake, there are no easy
solutions.

Some of the medical schools in USA, UK and
Canada have started centers for academic integri-
ty and some have come up with a road map with
strict guidelines to enforce integrity in medical edu-
cation.

Many universities in India have recently begun to
use mobile-phone jammers and closed-circuit tele-
visions to monitors students during examinations. It
is well known, however, that tech-savvy students
have turned to specific cell-phone services which
are not blocked by the jammers, and to other de-
vices such as walkie-talkies on frequency modulated band widths.

Where do we go from here?

Unfortunately cheating has become so universal, that most academicians now consider efforts to contain this trend by a few motivated individuals or institutions as a wasted effort.

I beg to differ.

Vifredo Pareto in 1897 proposed the 80-20 principle, the “Pareto principle” which postulates that all it takes is 20% of the individuals within a group to bring about a change in the remaining 80%. He did his work on economic principles but in the past 100 plus years this principle has been applied to various disciplines including organizational behavior. These 20% individuals may be in any type of organization but they become change agents.

It is known that when changes are deliberately brought about by individuals in their own circles of influence, however small they may be, these circles tend to eventually enlarge and coalesce to fill up our circles of concern.

According to McCabe and Treviño: “…an institution ability to develop a shared understanding and acceptance of its academic integrity policies has a significant and substantive impact on student perceptions of their peers’ behavior. … Thus, programs aimed at distributing, explaining, and gaining student and faculty acceptance of academic integrity policies may be particularly useful”. It has been found that “honor codes” where students are given responsibility for ethical behavior, have been remarkably successful.

Over the past 20 years or so, more and more institutions have begun to adopt such academic honor codes.

If for instance, I in my office, my department and my institution should resolve to uphold truth, honesty and integrity, it is more likely that a few others around me will join me. Slowly, but surely the critical mass of change agents tends to build up. This will help create an honest and fair climate for higher education in the world of tomorrow.

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