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Academic integrity as an element of anti-corruption policy in higher education: comparative insights from Uzbekistan and Finland

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Abstract

Academic integrity is a core pillar of anti-corruption policy in higher education governance. Academic misconduct including plagiarism, bribery in admissions and grading, falsification of research results, and the abuse of administrative authority — severely undermines institutional credibility and erodes public trust in the educational system. This study provides a comprehensive comparative analysis of the mechanisms ensuring academic integrity in Uzbekistan and Finland. Using a robust mixed-methods approach, the research integrates comparative legal analysis, systematic document review, and primary empirical data derived from a survey of 650 participants, including students and faculty members, alongside expert interviews and institutional statistics. The study evaluates regulatory frameworks, compliance mechanisms, digital governance tools, and accountability systems through the theoretical lenses of institutional economics and alignment theory.

Findings indicate that Uzbekistan has implemented substantial top-down reforms characterized by centralized monitoring and the rapid deployment of digital platforms, specifically the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS). However, the analysis reveals that enforcement remains predominantly compliance-driven, suggesting that technical solutions must be accompanied by stronger institutional autonomy and a deeply internalized ethical culture. In contrast, the Finnish model emphasizes high levels of institutional autonomy and trust-based accountability, supported by independent external audits from the Finnish



Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) and stringent research integrity standards established by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK).

The study proposes an original hybrid governance model that integrates sophisticated digital compliance tools with an ethics-based institutional culture. These results contribute significantly to anti-corruption governance theory and provide actionable practical recommendations for policymakers and university administrators. The proposed framework is particularly applicable in reform-oriented higher education systems within transitional post-Soviet contexts, aiming to balance state oversight with institutional integrity.

Keywords: academic integrity, anti-corruption governance, higher education, Uzbekistan, Finland, hybrid governance, institutional ethics

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1. Introduction

Academic integrity serves as a foundational principle of higher education and a critical component of institutional accountability [1]. In the contemporary global landscape, corruption in higher education is recognized as a systemic challenge that severely undermines educational quality, erodes public trust, and devalues academic credentials [2] [3]. International organizations, including UNESCO, the United Nations, and Transparency International, consistently highlight the adverse impact of academic corruption on the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to quality education and reduced inequalities [4].

In transitional systems such as Uzbekistan, corruption risks manifest through various channels, including admissions, grading, procurement, and research evaluation [5]. These practices compromise transparency and the rule of law, necessitating radical systemic reforms. Since 2017, Uzbekistan has embarked on a transformative journey to modernize its higher education sector, guided by pivotal legal frameworks such as Presidential Decrees PD-6257 (2021) [6] and PD-5729 (2019) [7]. These initiatives aim to create an environment of zero tolerance toward corruption by implementing digital oversight through the HEMIS platform and enhancing public participation in governance.

In contrast, Finland, which is consistently ranked among the least corrupt nations globally, offers a mature governance model rooted in institutional autonomy, professional ethics, and decentralized oversight [8] [9]. The Finnish approach is characterized by a high degree of social trust and is supported by independent bodies such as the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) and the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK). While Finland relies on a self-regulatory ethical culture, Uzbekistan's current strategy is predominantly compliance-driven and top-down, providing a unique opportunity for comparative analysis.

Despite the extensive literature on academic misconduct, limited research integrates academic integrity into a broader anti-corruption governance theory [10]. Comparative studies between post-Soviet reform-oriented systems and Nordic trust-based models remain scarce, particularly

regarding the scalability of digital monitoring versus ethical self-regulation. This study addresses this significant gap by examining how regulatory design, institutional autonomy, compliance mechanisms, and ethical culture interact to shape sustainable academic integrity systems. By synthesizing the digital transparency of the Uzbek model with the integrity-driven culture of the Finnish system, this research proposes a hybrid governance framework applicable in diverse reform-oriented higher education environments.

2. Literature Review

Academic integrity is increasingly recognized not merely as a localized ethical concern but as a foundational pillar of macro-level anti-corruption governance. Theoretical frameworks addressing this issue are diverse: institutional economics focuses on the alignment of incentives and the reduction of information asymmetry; compliance theory emphasizes the role of formal enforcement and deterrents; and normative governance models highlight the power of internalized professional ethics. Despite these robust foundations, comparative research that integrates legal frameworks, digital monitoring tools, and institutional culture remains significantly underdeveloped.

Bretag (2016) provides a seminal framework by defining academic integrity as a proactive, values-based commitment to ethical scholarship, rather than a mere absence of misconduct. This perspective shifts the focus from punitive measures to the cultivation of five core values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. Complementing this, Macfarlane, Zhang, and Pun (2014) link academic misconduct to a complex interplay of cultural and institutional factors, arguing that institutional pressures for prestige often inadvertently incentivize unethical behavior. From a systemic viewpoint, Heyneman (2004) stresses that corruption in education is uniquely damaging because it erodes meritocracy, devalues human capital, and destroys the perceived credibility of state institutions, thereby hindering long-term economic development.

The Nordic experience, particularly in Finland, serves as a benchmark for integrity-driven governance. Kallio and Kangasniemi (2019) illustrate how systematic ethics training and the “Responsible Conduct of Research” guidelines foster a deep sense of academic responsibility among faculty and students. In the Finnish context, integrity is maintained through a decentralized, trust-based model where the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) provides a unified ethical code that institutions adopt voluntarily.

Conversely, in the context of Central Asia, researchers such as Topildiev, B. R., and Nazarov, S. N (2025) highlight the critical importance of ethics amid rapid internationalization and digitalization. They argue that while digital platforms like HEMIS in Uzbekistan provide essential transparency, they must be supported by a shift in academic culture to be effective. However, a significant gap persists in the literature: cross-country comparisons between systems with vastly different corruption perceptions and levels of academic freedom are rare. Most studies focus either on high-trust Western models or on reform-oriented transitional systems in isolation. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing these divergent approaches into a hybrid governance model, examining how digital compliance and ethical norms can be integrated to ensure sustainable institutional integrity in reform-oriented environments.

3. Methodology

A qualitative comparative case study approach was employed, combining legal, institutional, and empirical analyses. The study utilized a purposive sampling technique to ensure the

representation of diverse academic disciplines, supplemented by convenience sampling to maximize the response rate among the student body.

1. Comparative Legal Analysis: Examined national legislation, including education laws, anti-corruption acts, and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) regulations (Finnish Higher Education Act, 2019; Education Law of Uzbekistan, 2020).
2. Document Analysis: Reviewed policy papers, government reports, institutional guidelines, academic publications, and international frameworks (UNESCO, OECD, E4J modules) [11].
3. Empirical Data: Online survey (N=650), semi-structured interviews with 12 key informants, including university administrators, compliance officers, ministry officials, and legal experts. Institutional statistics and CPI indicators were also analyzed [12].

Data were coded thematically and triangulated across legal texts, policy documents, and empirical sources to ensure reliability and validity. Limitations include reliance on perception-based survey responses and restricted access to confidential institutional data.

4. Results

In recent years, Uzbekistan has embarked on a transformative journey to modernize its higher education sector, placing academic integrity at the heart of its national development strategy. Central to these efforts are Presidential Decrees PD-6257 (2021) and PD-5729 (2019), which established a comprehensive legal framework for eliminating systemic corruption. A cornerstone of this reform is the digitalization of administrative and academic processes through the implementation of the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS). This platform was specifically designed to reduce the "human factor" by automating student records, grading, and admissions. By centralizing academic data, HEMIS ensures that student performance and faculty evaluations are transparent, auditable, and less susceptible to unauthorized manipulation.

Beyond technological solutions, the reform strategy includes the mandatory establishment of specialized compliance units within all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These units are tasked with conducting internal audits, monitoring corruption risks, and ensuring that institutional policies align with national anti-corruption standards. Furthermore, the Anti-Corruption Agency of the Republic of Uzbekistan plays a vital role in overseeing these units and conducting periodic integrity assessments across the sector.

The analysis of reported corruption incidents in Uzbek HEIs between 2021 and 2025 reveals a complex landscape. Statistical data indicates a range of 75 to 115 registered cases annually. While these numbers highlight persistent challenges, they also reflect improved detection mechanisms and a growing willingness of stakeholders to report misconduct. To address the root causes of these incidents, the government has prioritized preventive strategies, including large-scale legal education initiatives for youth, anti-corruption awareness campaigns, and the integration of ethics modules into university curricula. These programs aim to foster a culture of "zero tolerance" toward corruption, shifting the focus from purely punitive measures to long-term normative change. By combining digital oversight with public participation, Uzbekistan seeks to build a resilient academic environment that meets international standards of transparency and meritocracy.

Table 1. Corruption in Higher Education: Prevention & Mitigation

№	Corruption Type	Definition	Example in HEI Context
11	Nepotism	Favouring family members for jobs or benefits.	A Dean appointing an unqualified relative as a senior lecturer.
22	Cronyism	Appointing personal friends to positions of power.	A Rector awarding grants exclusively to their inner circle .
33	Favoritism	Giving preferential treatment to specific individuals.	A professor giving higher grades based on personal liking.
44	Lobbying	Lawfully attempting to influence policy decisions.	A university group advocating for increased funding for specific programs.
55	Clientelism	Exchanging resources for political support/loyalty .	A student leader providing exam leaks in exchange for election votes .
66	Pantouflage	Moving from a public role to a private job (revolving door).	An official joining a private university board they recently accredited.

Source: Ministry of Justice of Uzbekistan, 2024 [13]; Anti-Corruption Agency, 2023 [14].

Preventive strategies within the Uzbek higher education sector increasingly emphasize integrity education, systematic awareness campaigns, and proactive role modeling, all of which are being integrated into core curricula and diverse extracurricular activities. These measures are strategically aligned with the transformative mandates of Presidential Decrees PD-6257 (06.07.2021), “On measures to create an environment of intolerance to corruption, radically reduce corruption in public administration and expand public participation”, and PD-5729 (27.05.2019), “On measures to further improve the anti-corruption system in the Republic of Uzbekistan”. These legal frameworks advocate for a shift from purely punitive measures to a comprehensive “integrity ecosystem” that fosters transparency and public oversight.

In transitional post-Soviet systems, such as Uzbekistan, the legacy of weak institutional governance and bureaucratic opacity historically increased susceptibility to academic corruption. Such vulnerabilities manifest in admissions, grading, and certification processes, thereby undermining both the quality of education and the level of public trust in state institutions. By embedding ethical standards directly into the pedagogical process and leveraging digital tools for monitoring, the current reforms aim to mitigate these structural risks. This holistic approach recognizes that long-term academic integrity requires more than just legal enforcement; it necessitates a fundamental shift in the social norms and professional values of both students and faculty members.

Finland

The Finnish Model of Academic Integrity and Trust-Based Governance. Finland’s approach to academic integrity is defined by a mature, trust-based, and highly decentralized governance model that stands in stark contrast to centralized compliance systems [15]. At the core of this model is institutional autonomy, which grants universities the freedom to manage their internal affairs while simultaneously holding them accountable for the quality and ethical standards of their output. Rather than relying on rigid state surveillance, the Finnish system fosters a strong professional ethics culture where integrity is viewed as a shared responsibility among students, faculty, and administrators.

The framework is supported by two primary independent bodies that ensure national standards are met without infringing on academic freedom. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) conducts rigorous independent quality audits, focusing on the effectiveness of institutional quality management systems rather than individual punitive checks. Complementing this, the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) establishes the unified “Responsible Conduct of Research” (RCR) guidelines [16]. These standards are adopted voluntarily by higher education institutions (HEIs), emphasizing self-regulation and peer oversight. This decentralization minimizes bureaucratic corruption risks by removing centralized points of control and replacing them with transparent, peer-led accountability. Consequently, Finland’s high level of academic integrity is maintained not through fear of sanction, but through a deeply internalized commitment to transparency and ethical excellence.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Higher Education Governance and Anti-Corruption Frameworks

№	Feature	Uzbekistan	Finland
1	Governance Model	Centralized (Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation)	Decentralized (High institutional autonomy)
2	Primary Monitoring Tool	HEMIS (Information management system)	FINEEC (External quality audits)
3	Ethics Oversight	Agency for Combating Corruption	TENK (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity)
4	Anti-Corruption Focus	Digitalization and regulatory compliance	Culture of trust, transparency, and integrity
5	Quality Assurance	State-led inspection	Independent audits and self-evaluation

Table 3. Finland – Education System Snapshot 2023–2025

№	Indicator	Finland (%)	EU Average (%)	Target/Note
1	STEM enrolment (tertiary)	35.3	26.9	EU 2030: 32
2	Women in STEM (tertiary)	29.3	32.2	EU 2030: 40
3	ECEC participation (age 3–6)	91.1	94.6	EU 2030: 96
4	Early school leaving	9.6	9.3	–
5	Tertiary attainment (25–34 yrs)	39.1	44.1	EU 2030: 45
6	Adult learning participation	53.4	45.0	Finland target 2030: 60

Source: Eurostat; OECD; MINEDU, 2024 [17]; European Commission, 2024.

STEM Workforce Challenges and Inclusive Education in Finland

While STEM enrollment in Finland remains relatively high by international standards, the nation faces a critical paradox: persistent labor shortages that threaten its technological edge. Projections indicate a deficit of 130,000 skilled workers by 2035, a gap that necessitates a dual strategy of domestic talent cultivation and international recruitment. To address this, Finland actively promotes female participation in STEM through targeted initiatives such as “Shaking up Tech” and the prestigious L’Oréal-UNESCO “For Women in Science” program. These

efforts aim to dismantle gender stereotypes and expand the talent pool in traditionally male-dominated sectors like engineering and information technology.

Simultaneously, the Finnish government is focusing on the foundational stages of the educational pipeline. Although participation in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has increased significantly, structural inequities remain a concern, particularly for children from migrant backgrounds. To mitigate these disparities, Finnish policies have introduced a two-year pre-primary education pilot, alongside comprehensive workforce qualification improvements and inclusive education initiatives. These reforms are designed to ensure that the Finnish education system remains a vehicle for social mobility, providing equal opportunities for all children to succeed regardless of their linguistic or cultural origins. By strengthening the link between early education and future STEM competencies, Finland seeks to build a more resilient and inclusive labor market.

5. Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals two governance paradigms:

1. Compliance-driven model (Uzbekistan): centralized oversight, digital monitoring, and formal legal enforcement.
2. Norm-based model (Finland): institutional autonomy, independent evaluation, and professional ethics culture.

Key lessons:

Digital and legal compliance tools reduce transactional corruption but require an ethical culture for sustainability.

Trust-based governance supports long-term institutional integrity and public confidence.

Education, awareness, and preventive training for youth are crucial for developing anti-corruption norms.

Scientific Novelty and Contribution

The scientific novelty of this research is defined by its comprehensive analysis of anti-corruption strategies within the specific context of a transitioning academic landscape. The key contributions include:

Methodological Innovation: Unlike previous studies that rely solely on legal analysis, this research employs a robust mixed-methods approach. By combining doctrinal legal research with original empirical data (cross-sectional surveys and thematic coding), the study provides a multi-dimensional view of how top-down reforms interact with bottom-up institutional realities.

Unique Empirical Dataset: This study presents original empirical findings from Uzbekistan, offering rare insights into the effectiveness of the HEMIS system and recent presidential initiatives (PD-6257 and PD-5729). This data serves as a valuable primary source for understanding academic integrity in Central Asia, a region often underrepresented in global corruption metrics.

Theoretical Advancement: The research advances the application of institutional economics and alignment theory to the study of academic corruption, demonstrating how “guided autonomy” can serve as a bridge between centralized control and institutional integrity.

Practical Applicability: The study develops a hybrid governance framework that is highly applicable in reform-oriented higher education systems (particularly in post-Soviet contexts), providing a scalable model for balancing digitalization with cultural shifts.

Practical Recommendations

Strengthening Digital Oversight: Implement regular effectiveness assessments of digital tools (such as the HEMIS system) to ensure they effectively minimize human intervention and do not become mere bureaucratic formalities.

Institutionalizing Integrity Education: Integrate mandatory “Academic Integrity” modules into the curricula for both students and faculty, moving beyond one-off awareness campaigns to a systemic educational approach.

Enhancing Transparency and Accountability: Establish independent ethics committees within HEIs, empowered to conduct internal audits and report directly to governing boards, mirroring the TENK model used in Finland.

Adopting a Merit-Based Incentive System: Develop transparent KPIs for academic staff that reward research excellence and ethical conduct, thereby reducing the economic incentives for engaging in corrupt practices.

Public Participation and Feedback Loops: Create secure, anonymous digital platforms for whistleblowing and feedback, allowing students and stakeholders to report irregularities without fear of retaliation.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the fight against corruption in higher education requires a radical transition from purely punitive, reactive measures to a comprehensive, proactive ecosystem of integrity. While the rapid digitalization of administrative processes through systems like HEMIS provides a necessary technical foundation for transparency, the research underscores that technology alone cannot serve as a panacea. For such systems to be truly effective, they must be complemented by deeper structural shifts in institutional culture and a fundamental reassessment of the relationship between the state and academic entities.

The analysis reveals that the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms in Uzbekistan is inextricably linked to the delicate balance between state oversight and academic freedom. A key finding of this research is the necessity of evolving toward trust-based governance principles, which prioritise internal professional ethics and institutional transparency over rigid, top-down administrative control. By fostering an environment where integrity is perceived as an intrinsic value rather than a mere compliance requirement, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can achieve a form of sustainable immunity to corrupt practices. This transition involves empowering university ethics committees, protecting whistleblowers, and ensuring that meritocracy remains the sole criterion for academic advancement.

Furthermore, the comparative insights from the Finnish model highlight that long-term success depends on the internalization of ethical norms by all stakeholders. In transitional systems, the “compliance-driven” approach is a vital starting point, but it must eventually mature into a “norm-based” model to avoid the risks of bureaucratic window-dressing. Ultimately, the transition toward this holistic governance model is not merely a legal obligation under national

anti-corruption strategies [18]; it is a strategic necessity for the global competitiveness and reputation of the national education system.

While this study offers a robust framework for hybrid governance, it is not without limitations. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to measure the long-term impact of HEMIS on corruption perception indices and explore the scalability of Finnish trust-based audits in other diverse regional contexts. Such inquiries will further refine the tools available to policymakers in their pursuit of academic excellence.

The proposed set of measures enables government authorities to optimise anti-corruption monitoring mechanisms in HEIs, fostering public trust in the higher education system and enhancing the country's international rankings.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement: The study draws on both publicly available secondary sources and primary data collected by the author. Secondary materials — including national legislation, government and institutional reports, and international frameworks (UNESCO, OECD, FINEEC, TENK) — are publicly accessible and cited in the references. The primary data generated during this study, comprising anonymized survey responses (N = 650) and semi-structured interview records, are available from the author upon reasonable request. Certain institutional statistics and interview materials cannot be shared publicly due to confidentiality and data-protection considerations, as noted in the study's limitations.

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