

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

Psychological Mechanisms Linking Corruption and Academic Integrity in Universities: A Multi-Level Behavioural Governance Framework

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Abstract. Universities operate as learning communities, labour markets, and public institutions, therefore integrity failures rarely remain limited to individual behaviour. Corruption in higher education includes bribery for admission or grades, favouritism and nepotism, conflicts of interest, procurement fraud, and informal exchanges, while academic integrity concerns fairness and honesty in assessment, research, and professional formation. These phenomena share enabling conditions such as weak transparency, discretionary power without oversight, normalised rationalisations, and low perceived likelihood of consequences, which makes them mutually reinforcing rather than separate problems. The study formulates a behavioural governance explanation of how corruption and academic dishonesty interact through psychological mechanisms and institutional vulnerabilities. An integrative conceptual synthesis maps psychological mechanisms to core university risk domains, including assessment, admissions, supervision, hiring, procurement, and research evaluation. It then organises risk and protective factors across individual, peer, organisational, and system levels to derive implementable and auditable governance levers. The analysis identifies a shared behavioural architecture built from moral cognition, perceived descriptive norms, and opportunity structures. Moral disengagement lowers self-sanctions and legitimises wrongdoing through justifications that reframe bribery, favouritism, plagiarism, or cheating as necessary responses to pressure and perceived unfairness. Norm beliefs operate as accelerators because expectations that misconduct is widespread and rewarded increase willingness to violate rules. Sector indicators strengthen the risk rationale: 41% of respondents globally perceive their national education sector as corrupt or extremely corrupt, and more than 60% of university students report cheating in some form. Future studies should test the framework with mixed methods, quantify how norm-correction and procedural justice interventions affect misconduct rates, and evaluate how governance maturity moderates outcomes across institutional and cultural contexts.

Keywords: corruption in higher education; academic integrity; moral disengagement; descriptive norms; normalisation; procedural justice; behavioural governance; compliance capability; organisational culture; whistleblowing safety; auditability; prevention mechanisms.

JEL Classification: I23, I28, D73, K42, D91, Z13

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Introduction. Universities are simultaneously learning communities, labour markets, and public institutions, which means that integrity failures rarely remain confined to individual misconduct. Corruption in higher education may include bribery for admission or grades, favouritism and nepotism in hiring and supervision, conflicts of interest, procurement fraud, and informal exchanges of advantage, while academic integrity concerns honesty and fairness in assessment, research, and professional formation (CHEA & IIEP-UNESCO, 2016; Transparency International, 2013). These phenomena are empirically connected because they share the same enabling conditions: weak transparency, discretionary power without oversight, normalised rationalisations, and low perceived likelihood of consequences (OECD, 2018). A key behavioural insight is that integrity violations scale through social learning: when students and staff believe that “everyone does it,” they update their expectations and adjust their own choices accordingly (Zhao, Zhang, & Xu, 2019; Zhao et al., 2022). The societal baseline also matters: 41% of people globally perceive their national education sector as corrupt or extremely corrupt, which can prime cynical expectations about how universities function (Council of Europe, 2024).

This article argues that the relationship between corruption and academic integrity is best explained through psychological mechanisms that operate across individual, group, organisational, and system levels. The central claim is that corruption and academic misconduct are not separate pathologies but mutually reinforcing behavioural patterns shaped by moral cognition, perceived norms, and opportunity structures. Building on behavioural ethics and education integrity governance, the article proposes a practical framework for diagnosis and prevention that treats integrity as an organisational capability rather than a purely disciplinary function (OECD, 2018; UNESCO IIEP, 2025).

Literature review. Behavioural ethics research explains corruption as a progressive process in which actors neutralise moral self-sanctions and reinterpret misconduct as acceptable, necessary, or harmless (Bandura, 1999; Moore, 2008). Moral disengagement is a core construct in this literature, describing cognitive mechanisms such as moral justification, displacement of responsibility, minimisation of harm, and blaming victims, all of which reduce anticipated guilt and protect self-image (Bandura, 1999; Moore, 2008). Organisational perspectives extend this logic by showing how corruption becomes normalised when embedded in routines, networks, and tacit expectations, so that unethical conduct becomes taken for granted and self-reinforcing (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Norm perception is especially important because perceived descriptive norms influence corrupt intention, and moral disengagement can mediate this effect, implying that “prevalence beliefs” can be psychologically causal rather than merely descriptive (Zhao et al., 2019).

Academic integrity research converges with these findings by showing that misconduct is strongly shaped by perceived peer behaviour and by the perceived controllability of detection. A meta-analysis synthesising evidence on the perceived peer cheating effect concludes that peer cheating is among the strongest factors associated with students' cheating, and that cultural context can moderate effect size (Zhao et al., 2022). Broader integrity statistics also support a norm-sensitive framing: the International Center for Academic Integrity reports that more than 60% of university students admit to cheating in some form, suggesting that policy must manage social expectations and opportunity structures rather than relying only on moral messaging (International Center for Academic Integrity, 2025). Governance-oriented literature in education treats integrity risk as a systemic vulnerability problem, where corruption risks arise from discretionary power, opaque procedures, weak accountability, and incentive misalignment (OECD, 2018; Transparency International, 2025; UNESCO IIEP, 2025). Taken together, the literature indicates that universities need an integrated behavioural governance approach in which psychological mechanisms, institutional design, and enforcement credibility are treated as parts of one integrity system.

Aims. The aim of the article is to explain the psychological mechanisms that link corruption and academic integrity failures in universities and to translate these mechanisms into a practical multi-level governance framework. The article pursues three objectives: first, to systematise the main behavioural pathways connecting corruption to academic misconduct; second, to identify multi-level risk and protective factors that shape integrity outcomes; and third, to propose implementable interventions and monitoring indicators aligned with international education integrity guidance.

Methodology. The study uses an integrative conceptual synthesis and framework-building approach. It combines behavioural ethics research on moral disengagement and norm influence with education integrity governance approaches that focus on vulnerabilities, controls, and accountability (Bandura, 1999; Moore, 2008; OECD, 2018). The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, it maps psychological mechanisms to common university risk domains, including assessment, admissions, supervision, hiring, procurement, and research evaluation. Second, it organises risk and protective factors into a multi-level model that distinguishes individual cognition, peer norms, organisational design, and system context. Third, it derives a set of interventions and monitoring indicators intended to be auditable and to support continuous improvement, consistent with integrity assessment and diagnostic tool traditions in the sector (OECD, 2018; UNESCO IIEP, 2025). Descriptive statistics from reputable sector sources are incorporated to justify the scale of the problem and motivate risk-based governance design (Council of Europe, 2024; International Center for Academic Integrity, 2025).

Results. The results show that corruption and academic integrity failures share a common behavioural architecture built from three interacting components: moral cognition, perceived norms, and opportunity structures. At the individual level, moral disengagement and rationalisation reduce the psychological cost of wrongdoing, enabling bribery, favouritism, plagiarism, or cheating to be interpreted as justified responses to unfairness, pressure, or “how things work” (Bandura, 1999; Moore, 2008). At the peer and group level, perceived descriptive norms function as accelerators: when actors believe that misconduct is widespread and effective, they become more likely to disengage morally and to choose corrupt or dishonest options (Zhao et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2022). At the organisational level, discretion without transparency, inconsistent sanctions, and weak complaint mechanisms transform isolated violations into stable practices, which aligns with theories of normalisation in organisational corruption (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; OECD, 2018).

Table 1 summarises the core psychological mechanisms that create a bridge between corruption practices and academic integrity violations, and it highlights which governance lever is most directly implicated.

Table 1. Psychological mechanisms linking corruption and academic integrity

Mechanism	Psychological function	Corruption-related manifestation	Academic integrity manifestation	Governance lever
Moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999; Moore, 2008)	Reduces guilt and self-sanctions	Justifying bribes or nepotism as “necessary”	Justifying cheating or plagiarism as “survival”	Challenge rationalisations; reinforce accountability and ethical reflection
Perceived descriptive norms (Zhao et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2022)	Converts “what others do” into intention	Belief that bribery is common and rewarded	Belief that peers cheat and benefit	Make integrity enforcement credible and visible; communicate outcomes
Normalisation processes (Ashforth & Anand, 2003)	Embeds misconduct in routines	Informal exchanges become standard procedure	Cheating becomes a group routine	Redesign processes; disrupt enabling routines; rotate roles and oversight
Opportunity structures (OECD, 2018)	Lowers effort and increases payoff	Opaque decisions, discretionary power, weak audit trails	Weak assessment design, low authentication, poor appeals	Reduce discretion; increase transparency and traceability

Source: systematized by the author

Table 1 indicates that the most effective integrity strategies target both cognition and context, because mechanisms operate through predictable interactions between beliefs, norms, and opportunities.

A second result is that sector-level indicators support a resilience-oriented integrity approach. The perception that education is corrupt or extremely corrupt is reported by 41% of people globally, suggesting that distrust is not marginal and can shape expectations and compliance from the outset (Council of Europe, 2024; Transparency International, 2025).

In parallel, integrity statistics suggest that cheating is widespread enough to behave like a norm problem rather than a rare deviance: the International Center for Academic Integrity reports that more than 60% of university students admit to cheating in some form (International Center for Academic Integrity, 2025). These two signals jointly imply that universities should prioritise institutional credibility, procedural justice, and consistent enforcement to change perceived norms and reduce rationalisations.

Table 2 presents a multi-level diagnostic map that differentiates where integrity risk is generated and where protective capacity can be built.

Table 2. Multi-level risk and protective factors

Level	Risk factors	Protective factors
Individual	Moral disengagement; pressure; cynicism (Bandura, 1999; Moore, 2008)	Ethical identity formation; self-regulation supports; counselling and skills support
Peer and group	Peer cheating and tolerance; informal exchange norms (Zhao et al., 2022)	Peer-led integrity norms; honour codes with credible enforcement; pro-integrity student networks
Organisational	Discretion without oversight; opaque grading and admissions; inconsistent sanctions (OECD, 2018)	Transparent criteria; audit trails; independent review; consistent sanctions; protected reporting channels
System context	Low trust and high perceived corruption (Council of Europe, 2024)	External quality assurance; public transparency; integrity benchmarking; stakeholder oversight

Source: systematized by the author

Table 2 clarifies that integrity capacity is cumulative: individual ethics matter, but organisational design and credible accountability often determine whether ethics can be enacted under pressure.

Discussion. The framework implies that corruption and academic integrity failures should be governed together, because the same psychological mechanisms and organisational vulnerabilities enable both. If universities focus only on punitive sanctions, they may increase concealment while leaving rationalisations and norm beliefs untouched, which is problematic given evidence that descriptive norms can drive corrupt intention through moral disengagement (Zhao et al., 2019). Conversely, if universities rely only on ethical messaging, they may fail when students perceive peer cheating as widespread and rewarding, a relationship supported by meta-analytic findings (Zhao et al., 2022). This suggests that prevention should be designed as norm change plus opportunity reduction: transparent rules, credible detection, consistent consequences, and

communication strategies that correct exaggerated prevalence beliefs without normalising misconduct.

A second implication concerns procedural justice and organisational legitimacy. When grading, supervision, hiring, or appeals are experienced as arbitrary, actors become more likely to adopt market logics and informal exchanges, which are fertile ground for both corruption and academic dishonesty (OECD, 2018; Ashforth & Anand, 2003). International guidance frames education integrity as a vulnerability problem that requires risk mapping, controls, and accountability, reinforcing the importance of governance architecture rather than isolated policy statements (OECD, 2018; UNESCO IIEP, 2025; Transparency International, 2025).

A third implication is capability building: ethical identity formation and shared integrity values should be treated as professional formation outcomes, while support services and assessment design should be understood as integrity infrastructure. Finally, measurement should be triangulated, because self-reported corruption and cheating data are sensitive to underreporting and context; therefore, incident logs, process audits, and confidential surveys should be combined to monitor change credibly (OECD, 2018).

Conclusions. The analysis demonstrates that corruption and academic integrity failures in universities are linked through shared psychological mechanisms and enabling organisational conditions. Moral disengagement reduces internal barriers to wrongdoing, perceived descriptive norms transmit tolerance and reshape intentions, and normalisation processes embed misconduct into routines, making integrity failures self-reinforcing over time (Bandura, 1999; Moore, 2008; Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Zhao et al., 2019).

Evidence that perceived peer cheating strongly predicts individual cheating supports the need for norm-focused interventions, not only individual deterrence (Zhao et al., 2022).

Sector indicators showing widespread perceptions of corruption in education and substantial self-reported cheating prevalence further justify resilience-oriented governance based on transparency, accountability, and capability building (Council of Europe, 2024; International Center for Academic Integrity, 2025).

Universities should therefore adopt integrated behavioural governance: redesign high-discretion processes, strengthen auditability, implement consistent sanctions with procedural fairness, and develop integrity culture through professional ethics formation and peer norm strategies aligned with international integrity assessment approaches (OECD, 2018; CHEA & IIEP-UNESCO, 2016).

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