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## University Autonomy as a Value Basis and Necessary Environment for Academic Integrity in the context of the Ukrainian Quality Assurance System European Integration

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To cite this article: Kvit, S. (2024). University Autonomy as a Value Basis and Necessary Environment for Academic Integrity in the context of the Ukrainian Quality Assurance System European Integration. *Academic Praxis*, 1(1), 2-14.

To link to this article: <https://chelps.eduhk.hk/post/university-autonomy-as-a-value-basis-and-necessary-environment-for-academic-integrity-in-the-context>

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2024, No. 01, Page No. 2-14

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## **University Autonomy as a Value Basis and Necessary Environment for Academic Integrity in the context of the Ukrainian Quality Assurance System European Integration**

Serhiy Kvit

### *The Overcoming of the Soviet / Russian Legacy*

The realization of declared social values, including political rights and freedoms, is only possible alongside the existential choice of a particular society within its own national state. For instance, a society desiring freedom of speech will achieve it by demanding it from its government and, as a result of this public demand, creating favorable national legislation and economic opportunities. Similarly, academic integrity is rooted in the traditions of academic life, as well as the formal and informal rules prevalent in the academic culture and legislation of various countries and societies that adhere to them.

As modern Ukrainian political culture evolves, the legacy of the so-called "Soviet legal consciousness" is becoming increasingly irrelevant. Yet, its influence persists. This phenomenon can be described briefly as follows: in post-Soviet countries, legislation is significant, but not as crucial as the practice of its implementation, which in turn is shaped by the concept of "notions" (Rus: "poniattia"). These "notions" are tied to the criminal legacy of the GULAG era. They refer to the obligation or impossibility of performing a specific action, often based on a person's or institution's factual, frequently informal status, rather than their formal status, which encourages actions compliant with current legislation.

It is crucial for Ukrainian society to overcome the lingering Soviet legacy and forge its own cultural identity. As such, the political culture of modern Ukraine is built on the principles of freedom, primarily freedom of speech and freedom of choice, which were preserved in

historical memory and brought to the forefront during Ukraine's recent revolutions and armed struggle for independence from Russia. Notwithstanding, the case of academic integrity has proven to be more complex.

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union created an environment that fostered creative work for intellectuals, including researchers, artists, and journalists, in exchange for political loyalty and the production of high-quality intellectual output. However, plagiarism would have threatened this arrangement, which is why it was not a common phenomenon in the academic sphere during the totalitarian era. Such an act would have undermined the persuasive power of communist propaganda within the country and counter-propaganda abroad. Moreover, the imitation of scientific research would have compromised the competitiveness of the Soviet military-industrial complex, as military equipment was expected to function effectively in practice – flying, driving, and firing.

As a result, plagiarism was not a viable path to academic advancement in Soviet times. In contrast, in independent Ukraine during the 1990s and early 2000s, plagiarism became rampant and widespread. However, this did not mean that the Soviet authorities were scrupulous. Many young researchers were forced to work on dissertations for their bureaucratic superiors before being allowed to defend their own theses. In essence, ghostwriting can be considered the most prevalent form of academic dishonesty during the Soviet era. At the very least, one could argue that international industrial espionage was also a part of the USSR's economic development strategy.

The Soviets turned a blind eye to thefts from behind the "Iron Curtain" and from the cultures and heritage of people enslaved by the Russian Empire, as long as the loot benefited Russian culture (Yevtushenko, 2022). For example, the world-renowned Soviet "Kalashnikov machine gun" was, without shame, "borrowed" by Mikhail Kalashnikov from Hugo Schmeisser's SturmGewehr 44 design (BBC, 2017), with the actual author uncredited. Similarly, the Soviet Union's extremely popular "March of the Aviators" anthem was plagiarized from "Herbei Zum Kampf", the anthem of Nazi assault squads (ISTV, 2021).

One of the key questions that requires clarification in the context of academic integrity in Ukraine is: Who is directly responsible for upholding these principles?

*Academic Integrity: Who is Responsible?*

It's well understood that universities would be the most invested in upholding these principles, as their reputational capital is directly dependent on them. Unfortunately, this is not yet the case in Ukraine. After the adoption of the 2014 "Law on Higher Education," Ukrainian higher education institutions gained academic autonomy, but financial autonomy was not granted. As a result, they cannot capitalize on their academic achievements, and their market position and access to resources necessary for development are still not tied to their reputation (Kvit, 2017).

However, Ukraine has not yet fully overcome a fundamental principle of the Soviet economy of higher education, where the state controls the financial life of higher education institutions and is consequently responsible for their quality. So far, only a few precedents exist for the emergence of universities that have developed an internal culture of autonomy and responsibility. One notable example is the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. The revival of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ukraine's oldest institution of higher education, founded in 1615 but closed by Soviet authorities in the 1920s, to national university status led to the emergence of a unique institutional agent driving education and social change.

In the realm of academic integrity, a significant milestone was the adoption in 1998 by the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (KMA) of the Provisions on the Institutional Policy for Ensuring Academic Integrity, the first regulation of its kind in Ukraine (KMA, 1998). This move led to zero tolerance for plagiarism, which is the most common form of academic integrity violation in Ukraine. The public activity of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy demonstrates that reputation plays a crucial role in ensuring the quality of higher education and academic integrity.

Another hurdle that remains to be overcome is the challenge of translating and understanding key concepts. For instance, the term "academic integrity" has a subtly different connotation in Ukrainian, referencing "correct" or virtuous behavior rather than the integrity (wholeness) of academic life itself. Moreover, there is a conceptual clash between the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance of Ukraine (NAQA), which employs the concept of "common sense" in its normative documents, and the stance of the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, which disputes the use of this norm in national legislation.

Another example is the concept of "excellence". Although we can translate the word "excellence" into Ukrainian as "perfection", it is challenging to convey the corresponding concept, as there is no relevant cultural tradition and it is only now being established in

Ukrainian social realities. The concept of excellence is inherently phenomenological, allowing us to envision the horizon of academic quality that we strive for, while also leaving room for continuous improvement. In other words, excellence serves as both a direction and a goal. Furthermore, the content of excellence can evolve over time without diminishing its significance.

The experience of Ukrainian higher education development since the collapse of the Soviet Union also leads us to an intriguing conclusion: bureaucratic institutions and autonomous universities have distinct understandings of concepts implemented in Ukraine within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This applies not only to the terms and concepts mentioned earlier. Notably, the status of NAQA as a professionally independent institution, primarily from government control, was fiercely debated in public forums from 2020 to 2022. Initially, many viewed NAQA as a central authority akin to those in the post-Soviet tradition, which would naturally fit within the government hierarchy.

### *The Case of NAQA*

The establishment of NAQA, mandated by the Law on Higher Education (2014), brought about a new institution that defined its mission as operating on the principles of trust, initiative, and mutual values (NAQA, 2019). The Agency sees itself as a partner to universities, not a controller, and fosters practices of supportive communication (Kvit and Stukalo, 2021). Specifically, NAQA is responsible for accrediting Ukrainian universities and developing their internal quality assurance systems.

It's also noteworthy that NAQA has established an effective International Advisory Board (NAQA, 2020), which provides invaluable support for making informed decisions, developing a regulatory framework, and participating in court cases. NAQA's accreditation procedures are unusually transparent. Anyone with access to the public interface can use its online system, which contains comprehensive information on all educational programs at all stages of accreditation, including all necessary documents: <https://public.naqa.gov.ua/>.

NAQA has also implemented a practice of independent international assessment of its own draft regulatory documents (Wortham, 2019). In addition, the Agency conducts regular self-assessments (Self-Assessment Report, 2021) and research on various topics, including Ukrainian universities' perceptions of NAQA's implementation of new quality assurance forms, the level of trust they have in NAQA experts, expert evaluations of training quality, and the

effectiveness of study program assessments, among other areas. Notably, it was found that NAQA not only sought to build trust in Ukraine's academic environment but also drew on that trust.

The history of NAQA's defense of its decisions in court is particularly noteworthy. In 2021 alone, NAQA was involved in 16 concurrent court cases, the majority of which were lawsuits filed by individuals who disagreed with NAQA's identification of plagiarism in their publications. Interestingly, these individuals did not primarily challenge the academic integrity principles they allegedly violated, but rather focused on disputing NAQA's procedural authority to make such decisions, despite it being mandated by national legislation.

The list of authors whose plagiarism was identified in publications included the former Minister of Education, a politician who had been actively involved in corrupting the Ukrainian legal system and is currently under US sanctions outside Ukraine (who shared a lawyer with the former minister), the dean of a university law school, and a doctor who had plagiarized information from medical professionals who had provided care to police-injured participants during the Revolution of Dignity (2013-2014) on Maidan. In examining these publications, the NAQA Ethics Committee made several notable "discoveries." For example, in one dissertation, they found a technique to artificially inflate the text by randomly duplicating passages throughout the paper.

Obstacles to improving academic integrity in Ukraine are numerous, including the widespread use of plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty that became entrenched in the 1990s and 2000s. Other hurdles include selective accusations of academic integrity violations, a lack of understanding of proper academic writing practices, public settling of personal scores, the use of such accusations as political weapons, and attempts to portray the issue as inherently insoluble.

This approach enables the fight against academic integrity violations by focusing on the process, rather than just the outcome. While it is essential to eliminate the underlying social factors that contribute to such violations, other questions remain unanswered, including: should we aim to forgive past violators or, conversely, hold them accountable for their actions?

The fight against NAQA's activities took a judicial turn, with casuistry becoming a primary tool. In 2022, a new NAQA member claimed that students should not only represent themselves but

also all fields of knowledge, mirroring the actions of academics. This individual was not the only one to mimic a public activist. The Government eventually stepped in to restore NAQA's operations, recognizing the absurdity of the situation. Ultimately, the Supreme Court of Ukraine validated NAQA's efforts to uphold academic integrity principles as legal and appropriate (The Supreme Court of Ukraine, 2023).

In Ukraine, lively and often emotional discussions are underway about the importance of upholding academic integrity principles and how to protect them. The debate between Maksym Strikha and Ihor Anisimov, on one side, and Maksym Matsala, on the other (Anisimov, Strikha, Matsala, 2023), is a notable example. Despite the heated discussion, both sides agree on the crucial role of civil society activists and that instances of academic integrity violations extend far beyond plagiarism and manipulation of academic texts. In fact, any form of dishonesty in the academic field can be classified as a type of such violation.

#### *The Case of the Bill "On Academic Integrity"*

Kuznetsova, Nazarov, and Yefimenko (2021) argue that higher education institutions (HEIs) not only lack a critical perspective towards themselves but also often conceal facts of academic integrity violations. The authors believe that well-established international principles of academic integrity in the field of higher education and scientific activities are recognized, but largely not implemented. In most cases, this is not due to deliberate, systematic actions that contradict the concept of academic integrity, but rather stems from a desire to prevent the disclosure and dissemination of information about detected violations and resolve conflicts "peacefully".

That's why, an effective approach to resolving many of the issues related to compliance with academic integrity could be the adoption of the Law of Ukraine "On Academic Integrity". This law would not only recognize the significance of this issue for Ukrainian higher education and present it in the European context but also clearly establish that not only the National Agency, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, or other state bodies are responsible for the quality of higher education and research results, but also all higher education institutions and scientific institutions. According to this perspective, these institutions would be accountable for adhering to the principles of academic integrity (Kuznetsova et al., 2021).

Considering the issues mentioned above, in 2020, the National Agency for Quality Assurance of Higher Education of Ukraine (NAQA) decided to draft a special bill titled "On Academic Integrity", thereby transferring the primary responsibility for addressing these issues to the national level. This law will also establish key concepts and procedures that will make it impossible for violators to employ casuistic defenses in court. The first version of this draft law was published in the Agency's Annual Report (NAQA Report, 2020).

This was an unconventional move, which, however, offers significant opportunities for finding effective solutions. The discussion involving the members of the International Advisory Board was particularly intriguing. Ultimately, the idea was endorsed as the most relevant to Ukraine's current social context. Finally, on June 6, 2024, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted the draft Law on Academic Integrity as a groundwork based on the results of consideration in the first reading (# 10392 dated 08.01.2024). The tasks associated with it include, in particular, ensuring legal certainty regarding the content of academic integrity, establishing basic principles and rules, clarification the main types of violations, regulating the main procedures for responding to violations, distinguishing the issue of protecting academic integrity and the issue of copyright protection and related rights, etc.

I would like to emphasize that the draft law "On Academic Integrity" cannot stimulate initiative; it can only distribute responsibility and create tools to combat legal casuistry. There is no other way to promote initiative within higher education institutions and university communities than by establishing comprehensive university autonomy, which Ukraine has so far halted at the issue of financial autonomy. The argument that it is not the right time to address this issue, citing the ongoing full-scale war with Russia, is unconvincing. Without comprehensive financial autonomy, Ukraine will not have world-class universities.

Academic achievements should be accompanied by increased opportunities for higher education institutions to access more resources for development. It's not just about money, but also about values. Moreover, it's a path to intellectual independence, freedom of speech, and the freedom to conduct research. From another perspective, we can view the university as a mass medium, an independent platform for expressing socially important ideas. Ultimately, we will see the growth in the social value of Ukrainian universities as a result of financial autonomy.

*Alignment of NAQA with European and Global Higher Education Areas Realities*



The disparate understanding of fundamental concepts in Ukraine and Western higher education systems (EU, USA, Canada, etc.) presents a significant barrier to the international integration of Ukraine's quality assurance system. For instance, the 2015 European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) requirement for NAQA's professional independence has sparked heated debates in Ukraine and a struggle for independence from governmental influences. In contrast, Estonia emphasizes the importance of balanced interdependence among various stakeholders, including universities, employers, and government entities. This approach acknowledges that complete independence is impossible and that stable decision-making requires a nuanced understanding of these relationships.

Similarly, in Western European contexts, the term "civil servant" does not necessarily imply disciplinary subordination to a government, as is the case in Ukraine, where the formulation of quality assurance policy may not align with the ESG 2015 requirements. It is evident that NAQA, like any other national agency, must interact with the government. The key issue is how this cooperation is understood and implemented. Clearly, it is about delivering high-quality education and research and building strong, internationally competitive Ukrainian universities.

Accordingly, the Ukrainian government should be comfortable with the fact that NAQA's quality assurance policy and professionalism are primarily recognized by relevant international networks such as ENQA, EQAR, and others, including global networks. Notably, NAQA is already a full member of CEENQA and INQAAHE. It is important to distinguish this scenario from newly created anti-corruption organizations, such as the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption of Ukraine. In this case, we are discussing a different understanding of independence: each body within the national justice system must be independent in its own way. In contrast, the Anti-Corruption Agency interacts with similar national bodies on an individual basis, rather than with networks as a whole.

German universities do not feel entirely dependent on the decisions of German accreditation agencies, including those of the German Federal Accreditation Council, unlike in Ukraine. German universities are confident in their own social role and traditions, and they care about their reputation. They do not compromise their academic standards by becoming diploma mills, hiding fake programs, or ignoring violations of academic integrity. They also do not tend to self-isolate. In contrast, independent German accreditation agencies do not create uncertainty among universities. As a result, individual shortcomings on both sides do not lead to suspicions of collusion or dishonesty.

The absence of centuries-old traditions of quality assurance in post-Soviet Ukraine necessitates a transformation of the academic culture, a process that cannot be rushed and will therefore require a significant period of time. In comparison, the Canadian quality assurance system stands out for its decentralization, with national, provincial, and university requirements interacting effectively with accreditation requirements from industry associations. Notably, this system also features a productive practice of correcting deficiencies in universities through independent peer reviews ordered by other universities.

Striking difference emerges when seemingly similar or identical terms and concepts are used in practice, but ultimately prove to be distinct. For instance, the notion of a "state university" in Ukraine bears little resemblance to the concept of a public higher education institution in Canada, where almost all universities are publicly funded. In Ukraine, many stakeholders may still believe that the state should directly manage universities, whereas in Canada, the state acts as a reasonable moderator and regulator, aiming to create favorable conditions for higher education institutions while respecting their autonomy.

In Ukraine, a significant issue arises from the representation of universities. Typically, the rector serves as the sole representative of the institution, with full personal responsibility for its functioning. This tradition dates back to the Soviet era. In contrast, responsibility should be shared among a team, including the Board of Trustees, as is common in the United States higher education tradition. When the entire academic community is involved in decision-making, it fosters a sense of collective responsibility and ultimately enhances the reputational capital of the university.

Notwithstanding these challenges, Ukraine has achieved notable successes in education quality assurance. I would like to emphasize the importance of trust in NAQA from all stakeholders: universities, faculty staff, students, employers, and others. Promoting trust as part of professional culture has been a core concept for NAQA since its inception. We can highlight openness, efficient communication, and a focus on helping rather than punishing as key factors that have helped overcome the lack of trust inherited from the Soviet era. Instead, trust among all stakeholders is crucial for successful academic development and building academic integrity in Ukrainian universities.

## *Conclusions*

Fortunately, Ukraine has a vibrant civil society, comprising a significant number of activists and volunteers eager to drive reforms across various professional fields. During the war, this broad volunteer movement swiftly transformed into an armed civil society. The academic sector not only requires reformation as a result of the transition from one quality to another but also deserves attention and support from the government.

Implementing comprehensive university autonomy will lead to the creation of a pool of responsible and independent higher education institutions (HEIs) that will become hubs for innovative ecosystems. These institutions will transform into influential social players, promoting critical thinking values, fostering modern political culture, and strengthening Ukraine's cultural identity. The issues of academic integrity are among the most sensitive indicators of such reforms.

All efforts aimed at developing the academic sphere in independent Ukraine, with a focus on achieving appropriate standards of academic integrity, will continue to prioritize the implementation of comprehensive university autonomy and the development of a unique internal culture within each HEI. Only a real self-governing status for Ukrainian universities will enable them to leverage reputational factors to ensure quality and academic integrity. As a result, the role of responsible university communities and their ethical choices will grow in importance.

## **Acknowledgment**

This paper was presented at the European Conference on Ethics and Integrity in Academia 2023 (ENAI Annual Conference) on Jul. 12-14, University of Derby, UK: <https://academicintegrity.eu/conference/>; the full text of the speech was published in the book "Media, History, and Education Three Ways to Ukrainian Independence" (ibidem Press, 2024): <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/media-history-and-education/9783838218076> It was edited based on the discussion at the SEQA-ESG2 peer-counselling visit to The National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance - NAQA (Ukraine) hosted by the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (MAB) in Budapest (Hungary) on Feb. 15-16 2024.

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