



“I Stayed, but Not Silently”: Upholding Professional Identity as a Catalyst Against Corrupt Practices in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Corruption is far from a novel social phenomenon. It has been documented across centuries, from ancient religious texts such as the Bible to the literary works of Dante and Shakespeare. Yet, despite its long intellectual history and the unprecedented global mobilisation against it over the past three decades, corruption remains strikingly resilient. One of the most persistent and unresolved questions in contemporary corruption

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research is why so many anti-corruption initiatives fail to generate meaningful or lasting change (Ledeneva et al. 2017). This puzzle is particularly salient in transitional and post-Soviet contexts, where formal reforms often co-exist with deeply entrenched informal practices.

Kazakhstan offers a compelling case in this regard. Despite sustained reform efforts and the adoption of international anti-corruption frameworks, the country scored 40 out of 100 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in 2024, ranking 80th out of 180 countries worldwide. While such indicators suggest incremental progress, they also point to the limits of formal, compliance-driven approaches. Anti-corruption measures frequently struggle to penetrate everyday practices, culturally embedded norms, and the professional ethos of individual actors. As a result, corruption persists not only as a structural or institutional problem, but as a lived and normalised aspect of organisational life.

This limitation becomes particularly acute in the higher education (HE) sector. Unlike many other sectors, universities are entrusted with the dual mandate of knowledge production and the moral socialisation of future professionals. Corruption within academia therefore undermines not only institutional effectiveness, but also the ethical foundations of society more broadly (Heyneman 2004). As Hallak and Poisson (2007) argue, academic corruption is often structurally embedded, sustained by institutional incentives and informal norms rather than by individual moral failure alone. In transitional contexts such as Kazakhstan, faculty members and administrators may perceive practices such as favouritism, grade manipulation, or informal payments not as inherently unethical, but as rational responses to systemic pressures, including low salaries, bureaucratic constraints, and conflicting institutional demands (Osipian 2007).

Crucially, corruption in HE does not merely result in the misallocation of resources. It actively shapes moral dispositions. As Adams (2018) observes, repeated exposure to academic misconduct deforms students'

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internalised ethical schemas before they even enter the labour market. In this sense, universities risk becoming sites where corruption is not only tolerated but tacitly taught. This dynamic highlights the inadequacy of anti-corruption strategies that rely exclusively on formal rules, audits, and sanctions, and reinforces the need to examine the deeper normative and identity-based dimensions of ethical behaviour.

Despite a growing body of macro-level research on corruption and governance in Kazakhstan, studies that examine corruption from the perspective of individual actors within universities remain scarce. This gap is particularly significant given calls for more “context-sensitive” approaches to corruption research (Pelizzo et al. 2017), which caution against over-reliance on international indices that obscure informal practices and lived realities. In the HE sector, where historical legacies and socio-economic pressures often normalise ethical shortcuts, an exclusive focus on structural compliance risks overlooking the micro-level mechanisms through which corruption is reproduced—or resisted.

This observation gives rise to the central research puzzle of this study: *Why do anti-corruption reforms in Kazakhstani higher education continue to yield limited results, even when formal rules and oversight mechanisms are in place?* Addressing this puzzle requires shifting analytical attention from external regulation to the internal moral resources of academic actors, particularly their professional identity (PI).

PI refers to the ways individuals understand, narrate, and enact their roles within a profession. Unlike externally imposed mandates, a well-developed PI functions as an internal ethical compass, guiding behaviour even in morally ambiguous or weakly regulated environments. Such identities are shaped through “communities of practice” (Wenger 1998), shared professional norms, and personal narratives of responsibility and vocation (Kelchtermans 2009). When academics and students strongly identify with the ethical ideals of scholarship, their resistance to corruption is driven less by fear of sanctions and more by an intrinsic commitment to professional integrity and reputational honour (Treviño et al. 2014).

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the interplay between PI and ethical resistance within Kazakhstan’s HE system. Specifically, it asks: *How does professional identity among faculty and students in Kazakhstani universities shape their capacity to resist academic-specific forms of corruption?*

To answer this question, the study examines how academic actors understand their professional roles and how this understanding operates as a barrier against practices such as grade manipulation, nepotism, and

research misconduct. By foregrounding individual perceptions and lived experiences, the study argues that PI constitutes a critical, yet underexplored, component of sustainable anti-corruption strategies in HE. Rather than treating integrity as a matter of compliance alone, the analysis reframes it as a form of ethical commitment rooted in identity formation.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. The literature review outlines the theoretical foundations of PI and examines structural enablers of corruption in HE, with particular attention to post-Soviet contexts. The methodology section then details the mixed-method research design, including the use of the Professional Identity Awareness Scale for Higher Education (PIAS-HE) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings section presents quantitative comparisons of PI levels among faculty and students, alongside qualitative narratives illustrating individual strategies of ethical resistance. These results are subsequently discussed through the lens of “silent resistance” and institutional constraints. This chapter concludes by summarising the study’s theoretical contributions and offering practical recommendations for fostering ethical resilience in academic environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY, CORRUPTION, AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN POST-SOVIET CONTEXTS

This section situates the study within three interrelated strands of scholarship: (1) PI and ethical behaviour in HE, (2) structural and informal systems of corruption in post-Soviet academia, and (3) the limits of compliance-driven anti-corruption reforms. Together, these literatures illuminate why formal anti-corruption measures often fail in HE settings and point to the need for a micro-level, identity-oriented perspective. By synthesising these strands, the section clarifies the theoretical foundations of the research puzzle—namely, the persistence of corruption despite extensive regulatory reform—and identifies the gap this study seeks to address.

Professional Identity as an Ethical Anchor in Higher Education

Over the past decade, scholars have increasingly recognised PI as a critical determinant of ethical behaviour in HE, functioning simultaneously as a

moral compass and a protective shield against corruption (Wilkins et al. 2022). PI in academia is widely conceptualised as a multidimensional construct that integrates internalised values, moral commitments, and self-conceptions with the externally defined expectations attached to professional roles (Adams 2020). Rather than being fixed or purely individual, PI is socially constructed and continuously negotiated within institutional and professional contexts.

Central to this process is the role of “communities of practice” (Wenger 1998), through which academics and students gradually internalise shared norms, routines, and ethical standards (Jawitz 2007). These communities shape not only what it means to be a competent academic but also what is considered acceptable or unacceptable conduct. From this perspective, ethical behaviour is less a matter of rule-following and more a reflection of how strongly individuals identify with the moral ideals of their profession.

This relational understanding of identity is further developed by Gee (2000), who emphasises that individuals simultaneously inhabit multiple, overlapping identities. Ethical conduct therefore depends on which identity is most salient in a given context. For example, an academic may formally identify as a scholar, but act in ways shaped more strongly by identities rooted in kinship, loyalty networks, or bureaucratic survival strategies. This insight is particularly relevant in post-Soviet settings, where individuals often navigate a tension between collectivist moral expectations—such as helping colleagues or reciprocating favours—and formalised ethical standards that frame such actions as corruption.

Despite these insights, much of the literature on PI in HE remains detached from empirical studies of corruption. PI is often discussed in relation to teaching quality, academic development, or professional socialisation, rather than as a mechanism of ethical resistance. This disconnect limits our understanding of how identity-based commitments might counteract corrupt practices in environments where formal rules lack legitimacy or enforcement capacity.

Corruption in Higher Education: From Isolated Misconduct to Systemic Hierarchies

Research on corruption in HE has traditionally focused on identifying corrupt practices and categorising their forms. Scholars commonly distinguish between academic dishonesty (such as plagiarism or grade manipulation) and financial misconduct (such as bribery or illicit contracting)

(Heywood and Rose 2014). However, in post-Soviet contexts, these practices are rarely isolated or sporadic. Instead, they are embedded within broader systems of informal governance.

Osipian (2009, 2012) conceptualises corruption in the former Soviet bloc as a “corruption hierarchy”, in which illicit practices are vertically integrated and function according to predictable roles and expectations. Within this system, corruption operates as a structured market rather than a series of individual moral lapses. Academic actors—students, faculty, administrators—occupy distinct positions within this hierarchy, and participation often becomes a rational response to systemic constraints rather than a deviant choice.

One of the most striking manifestations of this system is the emergence of a specialised “dissertation market” (Osipian 2012, 2021a). In this market, academic credentials—particularly doctoral degrees—are commodified and treated as purchasable investments rather than scholarly achievements. The procurement of dissertations and journal articles follows a cost–benefit logic, reflecting an internal academic economy that prioritises status acquisition over knowledge production. This phenomenon suggests that universities are not merely exposed to external integrity risks (Sweeney 2020), but are internally structured in ways that normalise and sustain corrupt exchanges.

Such practices are underpinned by informal governance arrangements that substitute for weak or unreliable formal institutions. Drawing on Ledeneva’s (2018) work, scholars describe how culturally sanctioned forms of reciprocity—such as clientelism, patronage, or *blat*—create stable, though unethical, systems of coordination. Within these systems, informal rules often appear more predictable and functional than official regulations, rendering anti-corruption norms alien or impractical (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Osipian 2021b).

Empirical studies reinforce this interpretation. Ruziev et al (2025) demonstrate that in environments where merit-based systems lack credibility, academic actors rarely rely on formal regulations when making decisions. Instead, they navigate institutions through interpersonal networks and strategic alliances with bureaucratic power holders. This reliance on “who you know” rather than “what the rules say” produces institutional opacity and significantly undermines externally imposed anti-corruption reforms.

Policy Borrowing, Compliance Pressures, and Unintended Consequences

Beyond informal governance, the literature also highlights the unintended consequences of policy borrowing and compliance-driven reforms in HE. Cross-national research suggests that deterrence-based approaches and formal performance metrics are often ineffective in contexts of institutional fragility (Olken 2009). While international standards are designed to enhance accountability and quality, they may instead incentivise superficial compliance.

Hladchenko (2022, 2024) shows that in Ukraine, mandates requiring publications in Scopus-indexed journals increased output quantity but not scholarly impact. For many doctoral candidates, particularly in the social sciences and medicine, these requirements are experienced as bureaucratic hurdles rather than meaningful academic benchmarks. As a result, candidates strategically target low-impact journals or rely on intermediaries to meet formal criteria. Similar dynamics have been documented in Kazakhstan, where publication mandates encourage compliance-oriented behaviour rather than genuine scientific contribution (Kuzhabekova 2020).

Kuzhabekova (2021) further contextualises this trend by analysing Kazakhstan’s 2010 transition to a single-tier PhD system. Intended to dismantle the corruption-prone “Candidate of Science” model, the reform instead produced a hybrid system. While formal rules aligned with the Bologna Process, the underlying bureaucratic culture remained centralised and resource-constrained. Requirements such as producing seven indexed publications often exceeded candidates’ research capacities, incentivising the use of predatory journals and professional ghostwriting services.

Comparable patterns have been observed in Uzbekistan, where ghost-written dissertations and purchased publications have become an “open secret”. Ruziev et al (2025) report that PhD candidates may pay between \$3000 and \$5000 for completed dissertations or required articles, suggesting that corruption functions as an adaptive response to unrealistic institutional demands rather than as individual deviance.

Ethical and Societal Consequences of Academic Corruption

The consequences of corruption in HE extend well beyond institutional reputation. From a social development perspective, educational

corruption is particularly harmful because it undermines the moral foundation of educational institutions and affects young adults at formative stages of their professional lives. Much of this behaviour constitutes professional misconduct—violations of ethical standards expected of faculty and academic staff (Braxton and Bayer 1999).

At the institutional level, corruption can have far-reaching societal implications. Practices such as bribing accreditation bodies or falsifying academic outcomes risk producing graduates who lack essential competencies, posing threats to public welfare in sectors such as healthcare, engineering, and public administration (Heyneman 2003, 2004, 2005; Noah and Eckstein 2001). These dynamics reinforce the argument that academic corruption is not merely an internal organisational problem, but a public concern with long-term developmental consequences.

Methodological Challenges and the Need for an Identity-Based Perspective

Despite growing scholarly attention (Sweeney et al. 2013), studying corruption in HE remains methodologically challenging. Reliable measurement is notoriously difficult, and many scholars question whether precise quantification is even feasible. Researchers embedded within academic institutions face additional ethical dilemmas regarding positionality, objectivity, and potential conflicts of interest. They must constantly negotiate their roles as observers, critics, and, at times, participants in the systems they study.

These challenges partly explain why much of the literature prioritises structural explanations and macro-level indicators, while micro-level processes of ethical decision-making remain underexplored. In particular, there is limited empirical research examining how academics and students interpret their professional roles and how these interpretations shape everyday resistance to corruption.

Research Gap and Contributions

Taken together, the literature reveals a critical gap at the intersection of PI and corruption in HE. While existing studies richly document structural enablers, informal governance, and policy failures in post-Soviet academia,

they pay insufficient attention to how individual actors construct ethical meaning and sustain integrity under adverse conditions. PI is frequently acknowledged in theory, but rarely operationalised as a mechanism of ethical resistance.

In this study, we address this gap by repositioning PI as a central analytical lens for understanding corruption in Kazakhstani HE. By examining how faculty and students perceive their professional roles—and how these perceptions shape their responses to corrupt practices—this study contributes to corruption scholarship in three key ways. First, it bridges macro-level analyses of corruption with micro-level identity formation. Second, it advances an identity-based explanation for ethical resistance beyond compliance and deterrence. Third, it provides empirically grounded insights into how integrity can be cultivated within HE systems characterised by informal governance and institutional mistrust.

In doing so, we directly respond to the research puzzle and research question outlined in the introduction, laying the conceptual foundation for the methodological and empirical chapters that follow.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND ETHICAL RESISTANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This study addresses the persistence of corruption in Kazakhstan’s HE sector despite extensive formal reforms by conceptualising PI as a mediating mechanism between institutional constraints and individual ethical agency. Building on the literature reviewed earlier, the framework integrates integrity-based ethics, identity theory, and micro-level resistance perspectives to explain how academic actors navigate corrupt environments and, in some cases, resist them.

Professional Identity as an Integrity-Oriented Construct

To operationalise PI, the study adopts the integrity framework developed by Treviño et al (2014), which emphasises the alignment between values, identity, and action rather than rule compliance alone. This approach is particularly appropriate in contexts where formal regulations lack credibility or enforcement capacity. Within this framework, PI is conceptualised through four interrelated dimensions:

- Ethical Code Adherence

Ethical code adherence extends beyond formal compliance to encompass ethical mindfulness—the capacity to recognise and respond to ethical dilemmas in professional practice (Rest 1986). In HE, this includes awareness of institutional rules, disciplinary norms, and professional standards, as well as reflective engagement with their ethical implications.

- Transparency Commitment

Transparency is understood as an active professional commitment rather than the passive availability of information. It includes procedural transparency (e.g., grading criteria), decision-making transparency (e.g., promotion processes), and financial transparency (e.g., resource allocation). In contexts characterised by informal governance, transparency-oriented identities challenge opacity and discretionary power.

- Accountability Orientation

Accountability operates at three interconnected levels: personal accountability, peer accountability, and institutional accountability. This layered understanding reflects the socially mediated nature of ethical behaviour and highlights the role of professional communities in sustaining integrity.

- Integrity Advocacy

Integrity advocacy captures the extent to which individuals move beyond passive compliance to actively promote ethical standards. In restrictive environments, this may take the form of subtle resistance rather than overt whistleblowing.

Together, these dimensions provide an analytical structure for examining how PI awareness functions as an internal ethical compass in corrupt institutional settings.

Professional Identity Under Structural and Identity Tensions

Empirical research demonstrates that academics in Kazakhstan experience persistent tensions between professional ideals and institutional realities.

Rumyantseva and Caboni (2012) show that while faculty members often aspire to international academic standards, these norms are applied flexibly in environments where corruption remains normalised. Such conditions fragment PI and create ongoing ethical dilemmas.

These tensions are particularly acute for internationally trained scholars. Kuzhabekova and Mukhamejanova (2017) identify a “re-entry paradox” in which returning academics encounter institutional resistance, leading many to disengage from local governance while remaining within the system to preserve professional integrity. More broadly, academics are required to manage multiple and often conflicting roles—teaching, research, and administration—within rapidly changing HE systems. Studies consistently document identity fragmentation and internal conflict arising from these role tensions (Siekkinen et al. 2020; Shams 2019; van Winkel et al. 2018; Huang and Guo 2019), particularly among early-career academics (van Lankveld et al. 2017).

Ongoing tensions between teaching and research identities further exacerbate these challenges, especially under performance-based and compliance-driven reforms (McNaughton and Billot 2016; Arvaja 2018; Dugas et al. 2020; Shams 2019). In corrupt contexts, such tensions undermine the coherence and resilience of PI, increasing susceptibility to ethical erosion.

Resistance Mechanisms and Silent Integrity

To explain how PI enables resistance within corrupt institutions, the framework draws on Scott’s (1990) concept of “weapons of the weak”. Rather than focusing on overt whistleblowing, this perspective highlights everyday, subtle acts of resistance—such as refusing to engage in grade-buying or quietly rejecting fraudulent directives. These forms of infrapolitics allow individuals to uphold ethical standards without direct confrontation.

Empirical studies support this interpretation. Kuzhabekova and Mukhamejanova (2017) show that productive researchers often anchor their PI in international academic networks to bypass local bureaucratic and corruption hierarchies. Internationalisation thus functions as a protective mechanism for professional integrity rather than merely a career strategy.

Peer accountability further reinforces resistance. Drawing on Bandura’s (2002) theory of moral disengagement, PI is conceptualised as a buffer

against ethical rationalisation. When academics are embedded in professional communities that value integrity, moral self-sanctions are less likely to be deactivated, making corruption socially costly.

At the institutional level, transparency-enhancing mechanisms strengthen the effect of PI. Heywood (2017a,b) argues that open procurement systems, merit-based hiring platforms, and participatory governance structures not only deter corruption but also scaffold ethical behaviour by aligning institutional practices with professional values.

Identity Work and Adaptive Strategies

PI is defined in this study as a dynamic, action-oriented system comprising beliefs, goals, self-perceptions, and perceived possibilities for action (Kaplan and Garner 2017). This definition allows teaching and research identities to be treated as interconnected sub-identities within a broader academic identity (Trautwein 2018; Kaasila et al. 2021). When these sub-identities are integrated, individuals experience coherence and motivation; when they conflict, ethical dilemmas and emotional strain emerge (Garner and Kaplan 2019).

Academics continuously engage in identity negotiation and adaptation (Shams 2019), with emotions playing a central role in shaping identity coherence (Yang et al. 2021). These dynamics are particularly pronounced during doctoral socialisation. Kuzhabekova (2021) identifies a “mentorship gap” in Kazakhstan, where supervisors trained under the Soviet system often lack the capacity to support global publication demands, producing “problematic socialisation”.

In response, academics engage in identity work and role distancing (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003) to maintain ethical self-concepts under institutional constraint. While these strategies enable resistance, they also carry costs, including disengagement and emotional exhaustion (Pratt et al. 2006).

Framework Implications and Research Questions

Although corruption in Kazakhstan’s HE sector has been examined by several scholars (Feoktistova 2014; Heyneman et al. 2008; Kuzhabekova and Mukhamejanova 2017; Kuzhabekova 2021; Yelibay et al. 2022), existing research rarely theorises PI as a mechanism of ethical resistance. In

particular, subtle, everyday forms of resistance remain underexplored in post-Soviet academic contexts.

This theoretical framework addresses that gap by positioning PI as both a site of ethical vulnerability and a resource for resilience. It links structural corruption, identity tensions, and micro-level resistance, providing the conceptual foundation for answering the study’s central research questions:

- What structural and psychological role does PI play in shaping resistance mechanisms against corrupt practices in Kazakhstan’s HE sector?
- How do institutional constraints shape the boundary between pragmatic “silent resistance” and visible ethical action?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

To examine how PI shapes ethical resistance to corruption in Kazakhstan’s HE sector, this study adopts a mixed-method research design. This approach is particularly suited to the study’s theoretical framework, which conceptualises PI as both a measurable construct (integrity awareness and orientation) and a lived, interpretative phenomenon shaped by institutional constraints and identity work. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods allows the study to bridge macro-level patterns with micro-level experiences, addressing the central research puzzle concerning the limited effectiveness of compliance-based anti-corruption reforms.

Primary data were collected independently by the authors between February and May 2025. The design follows a sequential explanatory logic, in which quantitative findings inform the selection and focus of qualitative inquiry. This enables the identification of structural “awareness–action gaps” and their subsequent interpretation through participants’ lived experiences.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

A total of 200 participants ($N = 200$) were recruited using a multi-stage purposive and stratified sampling strategy to ensure representation across key stakeholder groups within the Kazakhstani HE sector. The sample was deliberately structured to allow comparison between faculty members and

students, reflecting the study's focus on PI formation and resistance mechanisms across different positionalities.

The sampling framework prioritised analytical relevance over simple proportional mirroring of national enrolment figures. While Bachelor's students constitute the largest subgroup and provide an institutional baseline, Master's and PhD students were disproportionately oversampled. Although doctoral students represent approximately 1.2% of the national student population, they comprise 8% of the study sample. This decision reflects the higher integrity risks associated with advanced research training and doctoral supervision, which are central to academic-specific corruption.

Institutional stratification included national universities (50%), regional universities (48%), and foreign-affiliated universities (2%), broadly reflecting national distributions (Bureau of National Statistics 2024). Fields of study included Social Sciences, Business, and Law (13.5%), Engineering and Technical Fields (16.4%), and Education and Humanities (27.3%). Languages of instruction were Kazakh (64.6%), Russian (25.9%), and English or other languages (9.5%).

Faculty participants reflected the broader composition of approximately 52,400 teaching staff across 113 accredited institutions. Public universities accounted for 68% of faculty respondents, while private institutions comprised 32%. Tenured faculty represented 38%, with contract-based faculty comprising 62%, a distinction relevant given the latter's heightened vulnerability to unethical pressures (Transparency International 2024; Annual Report on HE Faculty Statistics 2024).

Faculty were further stratified by academic rank to capture differential ethical risks across institutional hierarchies. Junior faculty (e.g., lecturers) were expected to encounter administrative risks such as admissions-related misconduct and plagiarism oversight, while senior faculty (e.g., full professors) were more exposed to high-stakes dilemmas involving research funding allocation and doctoral supervision. This stratification supports analysis of how PI awareness translates into ethical behaviour across career stages.

Quantitative Component

Instrument and Measures

The quantitative phase employed the PIAS-HE, adapted from Treviño et al (2014) and Adams (2020). The scale consists of 20 Likert-type items

(1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree) measuring four PI dimensions derived from the theoretical framework:

- Ethical Code Adherence
- Transparency Commitment
- Accountability Orientation
- Integrity Advocacy

These dimensions operationalise PI as an integrity-oriented construct rather than a purely compliance-based one, consistent with the study’s conceptual approach.

The survey was administered via a secure online platform. Instruments were translated into Kazakh and Russian using a rigorous double-blind back-translation procedure to ensure semantic equivalence. Participation was fully anonymous, and informed consent was obtained electronically to mitigate social desirability bias, a critical concern in corruption research.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were cleaned and analysed using robust statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics (means, medians, standard deviations) were calculated to establish baseline PI levels across participant groups. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, confirming the reliability of the PIAS-HE subscales within the local context.

To examine group differences, one-way ANOVA was employed to test for statistically significant variation in PI awareness and component scores between faculty and students, as well as across academic levels. This analysis enabled identification of specific domains where high ethical awareness does not translate into corresponding ethical action, thereby empirically grounding the study’s focus on “silent resistance” and constrained agency.

Qualitative Component

Interview Design and Data Collection

Following the quantitative phase, a purposive subsample of 12 participants (6 faculty members and 6 students) was selected for in-depth qualitative analysis. Selection criteria prioritised participants whose survey responses indicated strong PI awareness combined with reported exposure to institutional ethical pressures.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore how participants interpret their professional roles, experience ethical dilemmas, and enact resistance within corrupt institutional environments. Interview guides were explicitly informed by the four PI dimensions and the concepts of identity work and silent resistance articulated in the theoretical framework.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using IPA, following the procedures outlined by Smith et al. (2009). Analysis proceeded through iterative stages: close reading of transcripts, initial coding, development of emergent themes, and clustering of themes across cases. This process enabled a detailed examination of how PI is experienced, negotiated, and mobilised under institutional constraint (Ismail & Kinchin 2022).

IPA was selected because it foregrounds lived experience and meaning-making, making it particularly suitable for examining subtle, everyday forms of ethical resistance that may not be visible through behavioural measures alone.

Credibility, Reflexivity, and Ethical Considerations

Methodological rigour was ensured through adherence to quality criteria for IPA research (Nizza et al. 2021). Credibility was strengthened through iterative analysis, constant comparison, and the careful selection of illustrative quotations that remained grounded in participants' narratives.

Researcher positionality played a critical role in the interpretative process. The lead researcher (M.I.), a Gestalt psychologist with firsthand experience in Kazakhstan's HE system, brought a phenomenological sensitivity to issues of awareness, context, and subjective meaning. This insider perspective facilitated nuanced interpretation of ethical ambiguity while necessitating reflexive safeguards.

To mitigate bias, the study employed peer debriefing with co-authors throughout the analysis process, ensuring that interpretations were critically examined and analytically justified. Ethical approval procedures were followed, anonymity was preserved, and particular care was taken to protect participants from potential institutional repercussions.

By integrating survey-based measurement of PI with phenomenological analysis of lived experience, this methodology directly reflects the study's theoretical commitment to understanding corruption as both structurally embedded and subjectively negotiated. It enables analysis of

how PI functions not only as an ethical ideal but as a practical resource for navigating and resisting corruption within Kazakhstan’s HE sector.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the empirical findings in two analytically integrated stages. First, quantitative survey results are used to identify patterns in PI awareness and ethical commitment across institutional roles and career stages within Kazakhstan’s HE sector. Second, qualitative findings from IPA illuminate how these patterns are experienced, negotiated, and constrained in everyday academic life. Together, these findings address the study’s central puzzle: how PI shapes ethical resistance in contexts where corruption is structurally embedded and overt advocacy is risky.

Quantitative Findings: Professional Identity Across Academic Hierarchies

To examine whether institutional role predicts PI orientation, comparative statistical analyses were conducted between student and faculty cohorts. The dependent variables were the four PI components—Ethical Code Adherence, Transparency Commitment, Accountability Orientation, and Integrity Advocacy—alongside aggregated measures of PI Awareness and PI Level. Institutional role (student vs. faculty) served as the primary independent variable.

Group Differences in PI Components

As shown in Table 9.1, faculty members scored significantly higher than students on three of the four PI components: Ethical Code Adherence, Transparency Commitment, and Accountability Orientation. These differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$ or $p < 0.001$) and substantively meaningful.

Faculty demonstrated stronger Ethical Code Adherence ($M = 3.45$) than students ($M = 2.94$), indicating a greater tendency to refuse practices such as grade inflation or procedural manipulation. Transparency Commitment showed the largest difference between groups ($\Delta = +0.70$), suggesting that faculty are more invested in clear grading criteria, justification of decisions, and procedural openness. Accountability Orientation was also higher among faculty, reflecting a stronger willingness to correct errors and engage in peer or institutional oversight.

Table 9.1 Comparative analysis of PI constructs and statistical significance

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Student (M), SD</i>	<i>Faculty (M), SD</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>T-statistics</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>Key insight</i>
<i>Ethical code adherence</i> (Q1,2,9,10)	2.94 (0.82)	3.45 (1.07)	+0.51	5.83	<0.001	Faculty more consistently refuse grade inflation.
<i>Transparency commitment</i> (Q3,4,11,12)	3.34 (0.85)	4.04 (0.94)	+0.70	8.01	<0.001	Faculty excel in open criteria/justifications.
<i>Accountability orientation</i> (Q5,6,13,14)	3.05 (0.95)	3.33 (1.02)	+0.28	3.15	<0.002	Faculty are more likely to correct errors/audit hires.
<i>Integrity advocacy</i> (Q7,8,15,16)	3.44 (0.97)	3.26 (0.91)	−0.18	−0.17	<0.881	Faculty are slightly less vocal on authorship violations; the difference is not significant.
<i>PI level (Q1–8)</i> Aggregated	2.97 (0.66)	3.20 (0.94)	+0.23	3.45	0.001	Faculty practice ethics more rigorously; overall behavioural difference is significant.
<i>PI awareness (Q9–16)</i> aggregated	3.42 (0.81)	3.84 (0.97)	+0.42	6.19	<0.001	Faculty are significantly more knowledgeable; overall cognitive difference is significant.

Aggregated measures reinforce these patterns. Faculty exhibited significantly higher PI Awareness ($t(200) = 6.19, p < 0.001$) and PI Level ($t(200) = 3.45, p = 0.001$), supporting the hypothesis that professional socialisation strengthens ethical orientation over time.

The Integrity Advocacy Gap

The most theoretically salient finding concerns Integrity Advocacy. Contrary to expectations of linear ethical maturation, faculty were not significantly more likely than students to engage in overt ethical advocacy or confrontation ($t(200) = -0.17, p = 0.881$). While faculty scored higher on awareness and private adherence, their willingness to engage in high-risk actions—such as reporting misconduct or challenging senior colleagues—was no greater than that of students.

This “advocacy gap” empirically substantiates the concept of silent resistance introduced in the theoretical framework. It suggests that in hierarchical and potentially retaliatory institutional environments, ethical commitment does not translate into visible confrontation. Instead, integrity is enacted through quieter, individualized practices that minimise personal risk.

Effect Sizes and Practical Significance

Effect size analysis further clarifies these differences. As shown in Table 9.2, Ethical Code Adherence ($d = 0.54$) and Transparency Commitment ($d = 0.78$) exhibit medium to large effects, indicating practically meaningful gaps between faculty and students. These results suggest a “professional maturity gap” in which faculty have more deeply internalised integrity norms as part of their PI, while students remain in a formative stage.

However, the absence of a corresponding effect in Integrity Advocacy underscores a key insight: PI development increases ethical sensitivity and

Table 9.2 Transparency commitment shows the largest gap ($*d^* = 0.78$)

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Faculty mean (SD)</i>	<i>Student mean (SD)</i>	<i>Cohen’s *d*</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Ethical adherence	3.45 (1.07)	2.71 (1.62)	0.54	Medium effect
Transparency commitment	4.04(0.94)	3.34 (0.85)	0.78	Medium effect
PI awareness	3.84 (0.97)	3.42 (0.81)	0.47	Small effect

Table 9.3 The relationship between PI components and corruption resistance

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha value</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
1. Ethical code adherence	0.73	1.00	0.17	0.79***	−0.08
2. Transparency commitment	0.81	0.15	1.00	0.46**	−0.64***
3. Reporting willingness	0.76	0.84***	0.42**	1.00	−0.73***
4. Resource barriers	0.80	−0.11	−0.61***	−0.74***	1.00

Pearson Correlation Matrix (*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, $p > 0.05$; N.S., insignificant)

private adherence, but institutional constraints suppress public ethical action across all levels.

Correlations Between PI and Resistance

Correlation analysis (Table 9.3) provides further insight into how PI functions as a protective but constrained resource. All PI scales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$). Ethical Code Adherence showed a strong positive correlation with Reporting Willingness ($r = 0.84$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that internalised ethical identity is the primary psychological predictor of resistance.

At the same time, Resource Barriers were strongly negatively correlated with Reporting Willingness ($r = -0.74$, $p < 0.001$). This finding offers quantitative confirmation of the qualitative theme of silent resistance: even strong PI is significantly weakened by systemic obstacles such as fear of retaliation, lack of institutional support, or bureaucratic rigidity.

Together, these results demonstrate that PI functions as a necessary but insufficient condition for visible resistance. Internal integrity must contend with external constraints.

Qualitative Findings: Lived Experiences of Ethical Constraint and Resistance

The qualitative findings deepen and contextualise the quantitative patterns by revealing how PI is experienced and enacted in practice. Three inter-related themes emerged from the IPA analysis.

Theme 1: Ethical Adherence as Identity-Based Choice

Participants consistently described ethical adherence not as compliance with formal rules, but as a deeply personal and identity-affirming choice. A senior lecturer explained the pressure to inflate grades to avoid conflict with students or administrators, noting that assigning fair grades often required emotional energy and carried professional risks. Although outright bribery was absent, the pressure itself reflects the abuse of entrusted power for non-monetary "private gain," such as personal safety or peace of mind.

This narrative aligns with the quantitative finding that faculty score higher on Ethical Code Adherence, while also revealing its limits. Ethical behaviour is maintained, but at a psychological cost, often accompanied by feelings of helplessness and moral fatigue.

Students expressed similar internal conflicts. One undergraduate described the ease of copying assignments in an environment with weak plagiarism controls, contrasted with an internal sense of professional inadequacy. This illustrates PI formation as an internal struggle rather than an outward act of resistance, reinforcing the idea that ethical development begins long before formal professional entry.

Theme 2: Silent Resistance and Strategic Compliance

The second theme directly explains the Integrity Advocacy gap. A PhD lecturer described voting anonymously in dissertation councils to avoid open conflict, emphasising that "connections decide a lot" and that visible dissent carries long-term social stigma. References to historical repression and the cultural aversion to "snitching" highlight how ethical action is shaped by collective memory and informal norms.

This account illustrates a strategic form of resistance: principles are upheld where possible, but confrontation is avoided. Integrity, in this sense, is non-negotiable, but its expression is tactical. This directly mirrors the quantitative finding that Integrity Advocacy does not increase with seniority, despite higher awareness and adherence.

Theme 3: Structural Rigidity as Ethical Erosion

A third theme highlights how corruption is embedded not only in interpersonal practices but also in rigid bureaucratic structures. Participants described grant and curriculum requirements that force researchers and students to follow predefined templates even when they undermine academic judgement or research quality.

Such rigidity compels individuals to choose between formal compliance and professional honesty. This form of systemic corruption erodes PI by normalising ethical compromise, even in the absence of personal gain. Importantly, both faculty and students reported experiencing these constraints, suggesting that structural rigidity affects PI formation across the academic lifecycle.

Integrated Analysis: Professional Identity Under Constraint

Synthesising the quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a consistent pattern. PI strengthens with experience, leading to higher ethical awareness, stronger private adherence, and greater commitment to transparency and accountability. However, systemic corruption and institutional rigidity impose a silencing effect on PI, limiting the translation of internal integrity into visible action.

The findings demonstrate that PI operates as an internal ethical anchor rather than a catalyst for overt reform. Resistance is enacted through selective compliance, quiet refusal, avoidance of corrupt transactions, and strategic disengagement rather than public advocacy. This explains why anti-corruption reforms focused solely on rules and reporting mechanisms often fail: they neglect the identity-based calculations that shape ethical behaviour under risk.

Ultimately, the empirical evidence supports the central argument of this study: in corrupt academic systems, integrity survives not through confrontation, but through silent, identity-based resistance. Recognising and supporting these forms of resistance is essential for developing anti-corruption strategies that move beyond compliance and engage with the lived realities of academic professionals.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study, “I stayed, but not silently”, provides a mixed-method empirical analysis ($N = 200$) of how PI functions as a form of ethical resistance within structurally corrupt HE institutions in Kazakhstan. By integrating quantitative evidence with phenomenological accounts, the study advances understanding of how integrity is enacted under conditions where formal anti-corruption mechanisms offer limited protection. Rather than framing resistance solely in terms of overt reporting or whistleblowing, the

findings demonstrate that PI operates primarily as an internal ethical anchor that shapes subtle, low-visibility forms of resistance.

First, the findings confirm that Ethical Code Adherence is fundamentally identity-driven. The strong positive correlation between Ethical Code Adherence and Reporting Willingness ($r = 0.79^{***}$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that an internal moral compass is the primary psychological predictor of resistance. This quantitative result is reinforced by qualitative narratives in which participants framed ethical decisions as expressions of their professional self-concept (e.g., "This is not who I am; this is not what a true teacher does"). Ethical behaviour, therefore, is not primarily compliance-based but rooted in the preservation of professional selfhood.

Second, the absence of a statistically significant difference in Integrity Advocacy between faculty and students ($p < 0.881$) provides a crucial empirical foundation for the concept of silent resistance. Despite higher ethical awareness and adherence among faculty, their willingness to engage in visible, high-risk advocacy does not increase with seniority. Qualitative accounts reveal that silence is not indifference but a pragmatic strategy adopted by individuals with strong PI who seek to uphold their values while avoiding professional isolation, retaliation, and cultural stigmatisation (e.g., "people don't like snitches... I would be a black sheep"). Integrity, in this context, is preserved through discretion rather than confrontation.

Third, this study expands the operational understanding of corruption beyond individual monetary gain by identifying structural rigidity as a form of institutional corruption. Qualitative narratives describing inflexible grant templates and rigid curricular requirements demonstrate how administrative power can compel ethical compromise even in the absence of personal benefit. This finding is statistically supported by the weak and non-significant correlation between Ethical Code Adherence and Transparency Commitment ($r = 0.15$), suggesting that personal moral strength and systemic inflexibility function as largely independent forces. In such contexts, corruption manifests not through bribery but through enforced conformity that undermines academic judgement and professional integrity.

Fourth, the analysis highlights the external limits of PI as a catalyst for ethical action. The strong negative correlation between Reporting Willingness and perceived Resource Barriers ($r = -0.71^{***}$, $p < 0.001$) demonstrates that even a well-developed PI fails to translate into overt resistance when institutional environments lack psychological safety and

protection mechanisms. Ethical agency is therefore structurally constrained, not merely individually determined.

When interpreted through the integrated “awareness–action” framework, silent resistance emerges as a rational and adaptive response rather than a moral shortcoming. Participants’ accounts of “protecting core values through quiet refusal” explain why advocacy does not increase with experience. In high-risk institutional settings, professionals sustain their PI through private ethical “micro-victories” rather than public whistleblowing. This finding reframes the awareness–action gap as a function of institutional insecurity rather than ethical apathy.

POLICY AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The significant negative relationship between reporting willingness and perceived resource barriers exposes a critical weakness in compliance-driven anti-corruption policies. These findings call for a shift away from punitive, surveillance-based approaches toward the creation of “identity-safe” institutional environments, where ethical action is structurally supported rather than penalised. Policies that strengthen transparency, ensure protection from retaliation, and align institutional incentives with professional values are essential if internal integrity is to translate into visible ethical action.

Rather than demanding courage from individuals operating in unsafe environments, anti-corruption strategies should focus on reducing the personal costs of ethical behaviour and reinforcing PI as a collective, institutionally supported resource.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While the mixed-method design provides a robust empirical foundation, the study is contextually bounded. The culture of silent resistance identified here is shaped by Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet, hierarchical academic environment and may not generalise directly to more horizontal or Westernised HE systems. Additionally, the cross-sectional design captures PI at a single moment in time and cannot account for longitudinal changes as Kazakhstani universities continue to integrate into global academic networks.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs that trace the evolution of PI across career stages and comparative studies that examine

whether similar patterns of silent resistance emerge in other transitional or authoritarian educational contexts.

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