

Chapter 8

Strategies on Addressing Contract Cheating: A Case Study From an Australian Regional University

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ABSTRACT

Contract cheating is becoming a real challenge to many universities. Not only is it a relatively new phenomenon, but also it is difficult to prove as the work is often original and unlikely to be detected using standard anti-plagiarism text-matching services such as Turnitin or Erkund. Using a literature review approach, this chapter examines why students in general would take risks to engage in contract cheating and what strategies could be implemented to prevent or lower the chance for them to be engaged in this type of academic misconduct. An Australian regional university, which is also a leader in distance learning in the country, was used as a case for this study. The findings and recommendations provide insights for Australian university policy-makers when developing strategies, procedures and policies to face this issue. Limitations and future research directions are also discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

First publicized by Clarke and Lancaster (2006), contract cheating is defined as the submission of assessment which students have paid contractors to write on their behalf. Clarke and Lancaster (2007) classified mechanisms for contract cheating into:

- Auction sites;
- Discussion forums;
- Essay mills; and
- Feed aggregators, listing several contract cheating websites that fall into each category.

Mahmood (2009a) added that students may contract known colleagues to complete assessment on their behalf. Contract cheating is a form of academic dishonesty recently identified as a serious concern for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Although most commonly in the form of essays, the work commissioned in contract cheating may include almost any form of written work pertaining to lab-based sciences, medicine, computer-related modules, or any other technical subject material (University of St. Andrews, 2016).

The University of St. Andrews defines that contract cheating occurs whenever assistance in completing an assignment is enlisted from any outside source that is offering its services and this outside source may include, but is not limited to, another student, a non-student, or a company specializing in producing essays and technical writing (University of St. Andrews, 2016). It may include the use of friends and family, using discussion forums, using tutorial forums, using essay banks, and using auction sites. In its simplest form, contract cheating, if it is a paid work, is a fixed price contract for the delivery of a piece of assessment at a certain standard, and within a certain timeframe (Rigby, Burton, Balcombe, Bateman, & Mulatu, 2015). The price of such a contract could also be the outcome of a bidding process (Rigby et al., 2015). Some researchers limit contract cheating to outsourcing via online auction websites (O'Malley & Roberts, 2011). Some extend to include services offering 'substantive editing' (Lines, 2015).

The subject of contract cheating remains a relatively new phenomenon in the Higher Education (HE) sector and published research into the practice is still limited. However, contract cheating is arguably less accidental than other forms of plagiarism and thus specific research is required into student perceptions of contract cheating, as well as their identified reasons for committing the practice. As little reliable data on the subject of contract cheating has been made available for the current investigation, a critical analysis of the relevant literature is adopted providing a cogent and comprehensive perspective on the theoretical and practical aspects of the subject. Bourguignon et al. (2004) argued that a literature-based analysis helps to increase the level of clarity and precision of a concept, which is a necessity if we are to understand the subject and its impact to the HE sector. This literature review has considered the body of published research on contract cheating and found significant gaps.

Existing literature has largely focused on describing issues surrounding contract cheating and proposed solutions to deter or detect the practice. Several studies have begun to gain understanding of key issues, such as the size of and economic characteristics of the market, as well as student perceptions and reasons for contract cheating. However, these studies highlight the extent of additional research that remains to be conducted and highlights that smaller, qualitative studies may offer valuable insights into the practice and could be conducted by drawing on academics' own teaching experiences. This literature review also found that, unlike online and traditional forms of plagiarism, contract cheating poses a

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